



Department  
for Education

# Decisions of adult learners

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Kantar Public and Learning and Work  
Institute



Social Science in Government

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## Executive Summary

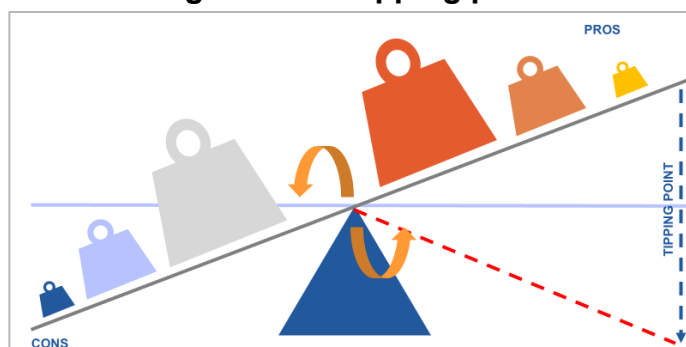
The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute (L&W) to undertake research to understand adults' experiences of, and decisions about, learning. This report presents the findings from in-depth interviews with 70 learners and focus groups with 16 adults not currently learning, and recommendations for the development of the Government's National Retraining Scheme and future lifelong learning policy. See chapters 1 and 2 for more details.

## Key findings

### Deciding to learn: the tipping point

The study reveals that, for every learner, there exists a complex and unique relationship between their own perceptions of the personal benefits and personal costs of learning. The argument that underpins this report is that the trigger to participate in learning for each adult comes at a tipping point where personal benefits (or 'pros') outweigh personal costs (or 'cons'), see Figure 1. This balance exists throughout an adult's learning journey, from before they consider learning right through to their completion (or termination) of their course, and back again to considering learning. An adult is tipped into or out of learning as the balance between costs and benefits changes. The weights on the balance represent the degree of influence that factors have for that adult. See chapter 3 for more details.

**Figure 1 The tipping point**

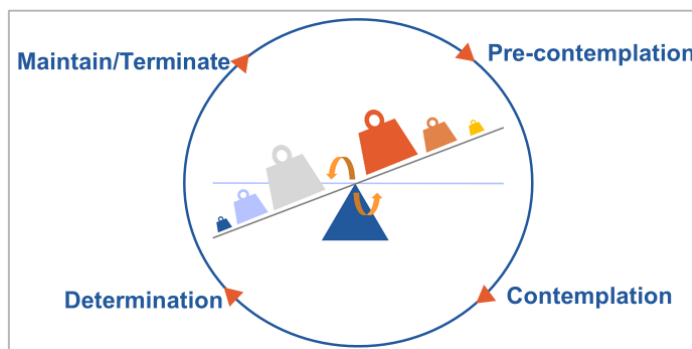


### Factors of influence and opportunities to encourage adults into learning

There were four stages of decision-making: pre-contemplation; contemplation; determination; and maintenance, see Figure 2. There were 12 main influences on whether and how adults engaged with and stayed in learning. These varied by the stage of their decisions for learning, and point towards opportunities to encourage adults into

learning. Table 1 summarises the influences and opportunities for each stage of decision-making. See chapters 4-8 for more details on each stage.

**Figure 2 Decision-making stages**



**Table 1 Summary of influences and opportunities to engage adults in learning**

Decision-making stage	Key factors of influence	Opportunities to encourage adults into learning
<p><b>Pre-contemplation:</b></p> <p>Adults are not actively engaging with the possibilities of their learning. They may not be actively appraising aspects of their life that they do not find fulfilling and are therefore not considering learning as a pathway to personal or professional betterment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceptions of psychological capability and control</li> <li>• Social and cultural norms</li> <li>• Previous experiences of education</li> <li>• Physical capability and a diverse set of practical and circumstantial issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interventions that raise the profile of learning in adults' consciousness and encourage them to consider it as a possibility</li> <li>• Communications that create a national culture in which adult learning is an ordinary part of life, where learning is something that adults cannot help but know about and come across e.g. priming through a TV character on a popular drama programme</li> <li>• Peripheral communications, positioned in spaces adults will encounter as they go about their everyday lives</li> </ul>



Decision-making stage	Key factors of influence	Opportunities to encourage adults into learning
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication sources that ask questions and gently encourage self-reflection, rather than actively marketing adult education</li> </ul>
<p><b>Contemplation:</b></p> <p>Adults have moved to the active consideration of the possibilities of learning and how learning might contribute to their personal betterment. They are exploring the practical and circumstantial aspects of learning and are engaged in a process of evaluating the potential value of learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceptions of psychological capability and control</li> <li>• A desire for personal betterment</li> <li>• Encouragement from influential people</li> <li>• Self-perception of capabilities for learning</li> <li>• Physical capability and a diverse set of practical and circumstantial issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The government, working with the National Careers Service, learning providers and other relevant organisations, should provide adults with clear and accessible information about the costs and benefits of undertaking learning. For example, the cost of the course; the type of financial support that is available; and the financial, personal and professional benefits of different courses</li> <li>• Provide information and support so potential learners understand how learning will alter their daily lives</li> <li>• Providers provide first-hand experiences of learning for adults exploring the possibility of learning</li> <li>• Employers and providers facilitate opportunities for adults to volunteer, or shadow work in</li> </ul>

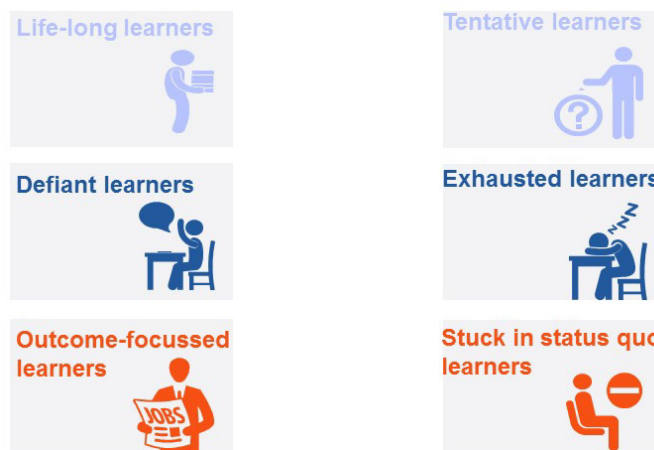
Decision-making stage	Key factors of influence	Opportunities to encourage adults into learning
		<p>occupations linked to learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design and deliver flexible courses , so adults see the variety of courses and formats of learning available</li> <li>• Deliver communications through channels people going through life disruptions are likely to encounter. For example, secondary school open days, GP practice, pension providers and job centres</li> <li>• Learning providers signpost their own local Information, Advice, Guidance (IAG) offers, where these exist.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Determination:</b></p> <p>At this stage adults decide to take-up learning and take action, such as enrolling onto a course. Adults act when their perception of the value of learning outweighs their perception of the challenges or costs to learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial and workplace support</li> <li>• Emotional and practical support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assure adults they can emotionally and practically cope with the demands of learning with IAG and support about the practicalities of enrolling and succeeding in learning. For example, expectations of the time commitment required; availability of financial support including access to loans, bursaries and grant; availability of wider emotional and practical support</li> </ul>

Decision-making stage	Key factors of influence	Opportunities to encourage adults into learning
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providers offer student support services tailored to meet the needs of, and be accessible to, adults, and to include support for adults with mental and physical health issues</li> <li>• Employers provide flexible workplace environment. and financial resources, to their staff</li> <li>• Government develop a trustworthy and centrally-managed source of information for adults to use when selecting a course</li> </ul>
<p><b>Maintenance, completion, and early withdrawal:</b></p> <p>Adults are now learning, but to maintain and complete learning, a range of barriers may need to be navigated and a sense of the ultimate value of learning must be maintained, to ensure adults do not withdraw from learning prior to completion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical capability and a diverse set of practical and circumstantial issues</li> <li>• Flexibility of provision</li> <li>• Quality of provision</li> <li>• Perceptions of psychological capability and control</li> <li>• Having clear goals for learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providers offer flexible provision, including the timing and location of learning, online and blended offers</li> <li>• Providers, employers and Government provide practical and financial support to adults to navigate difficulties with childcare, transport, course fees and equipment, and flexible working</li> <li>• Providers and employers provide and maintain supportive learning contexts</li> </ul>

## Types of learners

An attitudinal typology emerged from the range of factors influencing engagement with learning, see Figure 3. Our participants' attitudes to the purpose of learning was essential for determining whether, when and how individuals engaged with learning. While all factors were influential (whether positively or negatively), without a sense of the purpose of learning, individuals were less likely to engage with learning.

**Figure 3 Six types of learners based on their purpose for learning**



Life-long, defiant and outcome-focussed learners had a strong and clear purpose for learning, and described being more able to overcome barriers to their learning. Learners in these groups seemed more likely to decide to learn and enrol more quickly and easily. Conversely, tentative, exhausted and stuck in the status quo learners lacked a strong and clear purpose for learning and were less able to overcome their barriers. Learners in these groups seemed more difficult to convince to take up learning opportunities. More targeted and intensive support would be required to help these types of learners to recognise their learning purposes and to overcome their barriers to learning.

See chapter 9 for more details on the typologies, and visual examples of learner journeys.

# 1. Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE) commissioned Kantar Public and Learning and Work Institute (L&W) to gain a detailed understanding of how and why adults decide to undertake learning. The qualitative research involved in-depth interviews with 70 learners about their experiences of learning as an adult, as well as focus groups with 16 adults who are currently not engaged in learning. This report presents the findings from the study and recommendations for the development of the Government's National Retraining Scheme and future lifelong learning policy.

- Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the policy context, aims and methodological approach for this research
- Chapter 3 presents the 'tipping point' argument, which underpins this report
- Chapters 4-7 discusses the experiences of adult learners at each stage of decision-making
- Chapter 8 discusses the findings from two focus groups with non-learners
- Chapter 9 presents a typology of adult learners
- Chapter 10 discusses our conclusions and recommendations

## Policy context

The UK economy faces many critical challenges<sup>1</sup>: advances in technology and the changing nature of work suggest that an estimated 10-35% of UK jobs are at high risk of replacement in the next 20 years; an ageing population is increasing the need for adults to reskill throughout their extended working lives; the UK economy has an entrenched productivity gap relative to other advanced economies; and social mobility is low by international standards and does not appear to be improving<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> *Foresight Review into the Future of Skills and Lifelong Learning*

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/future-of-skills-and-lifelong-learning>

<sup>2</sup> *7 key truths about social mobility, the interim report of the APPG on social mobility*

<https://www.raeng.org.uk/publications/other/7-key-truths-about-social-mobility>

As outlined in the government's recent Industrial Strategy<sup>3</sup>, if we are to successfully address these issues, improving both productivity and social mobility, then adults will need to upskill and retrain throughout their working lives.

The benefits of doing so are well evidenced. There is strong evidence of the economic value of formal qualifications, with no apparent disadvantage if these are obtained after the age of 25<sup>4</sup>. Participation in learning as an adult can also result in a range of wider benefits, with research demonstrating a positive impact on health and well-being, as well as upon our families and communities<sup>5</sup>. Increasing and widening access to learning is crucial to our future prosperity, fairness and inclusion as a nation.

Yet, despite the strength of this evidence, the UK has seen a recent decline in the number of adults participating in learning<sup>6</sup> and skills training<sup>7</sup>. In addition, studies have consistently demonstrated persistent patterns of inequality in participation<sup>8</sup>. Younger adults, people who already have higher level qualifications and those in higher socio-economic classifications are most likely to be learning; with participation levels declining with age and distance from the labour market, and lowest for those with fewer or no formal qualifications<sup>9</sup>.

To tackle this decline in adult participation in learning and training, and to encourage training and skills development among working adults who are less well qualified, the Conservative party manifesto committed to the creation of 'the best programme of learning and training for people in work and returning to work' and to roll out a National Retraining Scheme.

As part of a £40m commitment to test innovative approaches to lifelong learning, the Department for Education has invested in a Flexible Learning Fund, to explore a range of innovations in delivery; and has also launched a programme of 'cost and outreach pilots' to develop the evidence base on how more adults can be engaged and supported in

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<sup>3</sup> *Industrial Strategy White Paper*

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/664563/industrial-strategy-white-paper-web-ready-version.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/664563/industrial-strategy-white-paper-web-ready-version.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> *Foresight Review into the Future of Skills and Lifelong Learning*

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/future-of-skills-and-lifelong-learning>

<sup>5</sup> *Healthy, Wealthy and Wise: The impact of adult learning across the UK*

<https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/LW-EU-Report-Nov-2017-V8-1.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> *Further Education and Skills in England – November 2017 (SFR 62/2017)*

[https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/660580/SFR62\\_Nov\\_2017.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/660580/SFR62_Nov_2017.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Green, F et al. (2015) "The declining volumes of workers' training in Britain", *British Journal of Industrial relations* 52(2) pp.422-488

<sup>8</sup> Egglestone, C et. al. (2018) *Adult Participation in Learning Survey 2017*, to be published

<sup>9</sup> *Foresight Review into the Future of Skills and Lifelong Learning*

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/future-of-skills-and-lifelong-learning>

learning. In addition, several reviews and studies are currently underway including a review of level 4/5 qualifications.

If we are to engage more adults in learning, it is vital that we understand their motivations and the barriers to their engagement. Previous research<sup>10</sup> shows that motivations for learning amongst adults are wide-ranging and influenced by personal, social and economic circumstances, as well as past experiences. However, it is also clear that adults face a range of situational, institutional and dispositional barriers as they navigate learning opportunities. Barriers related to an individual's personality can often be of significance for those with lower levels of qualifications, who may have had a negative experience of initial education and are least likely to have previously engaged in learning as an adult.

To facilitate more adults to learn and train, it is essential that a range of practical and circumstantial factors are addressed, such as cost, childcare, awareness of opportunities and employer support. Yet being motivated to learn, and learning being made easy or easier, is not always sufficient for learning to happen.

By seeking to better develop our understanding on how adults make decisions to take up learning, and how we can influence these decisions through available levers, this study is intended to play a critical role in informing the design of future interventions to boost participation rates. The successful design and implementation of policies to increase adult participation in learning and training is key to supporting government's wider policy ambitions of economic prosperity, social mobility, inclusion and wellbeing.

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<sup>10</sup> Pennacchia, J. (2018) *Barriers to Learning for Disadvantaged Groups*, to be published

## 2. Methodology

### Research aims

To design and develop a successful retraining scheme, DfE need to understand how adults make decisions about learning. This research therefore aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What influences engagement (and non-engagement) in adult learning opportunities?
2. What factors facilitate or act as barriers to the uptake and completion of adult learning opportunities?
3. What information sources and networks are potential learners aware of and interacting with?
4. What practical levers exist to encourage more adults into learning?

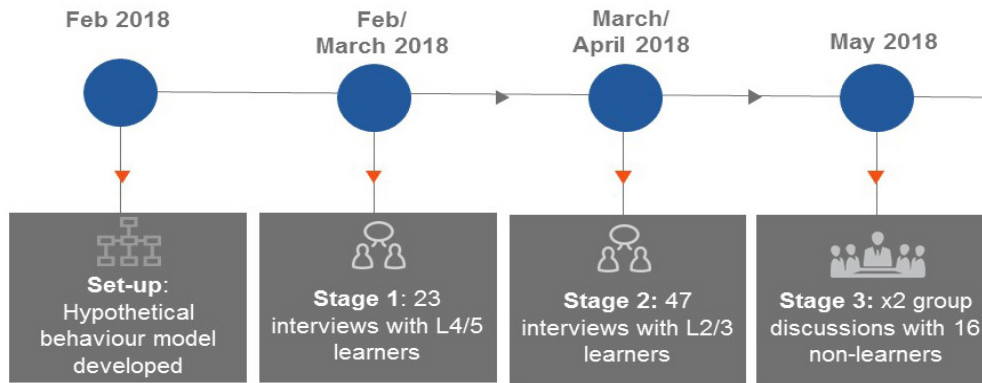
### Approach overview

We spoke with 70 learners and 16 non-learners across three stages of this qualitative research to address the research aims, see Figure 4. Adults included in the research scope were:

- Level 2 and Level 3 FE learners, for instance studying a Level 2 qualification in Barbering or a Level 3 qualification in Management. These adults were aged 19 and over, had left full time education and had a period of non-learning of a least one year (excluding gap years).
- Level 4 and Level 5 FE and HE learners, for instance studying a Level 4 qualification in Counselling or a Level 5 qualification in Teaching. They were aged 19 and over, and were either continuous learners or those who had left full time education and returned after a non-learning spell.
- Adults aged 18 and over who had not done any learning since leaving full-time education.

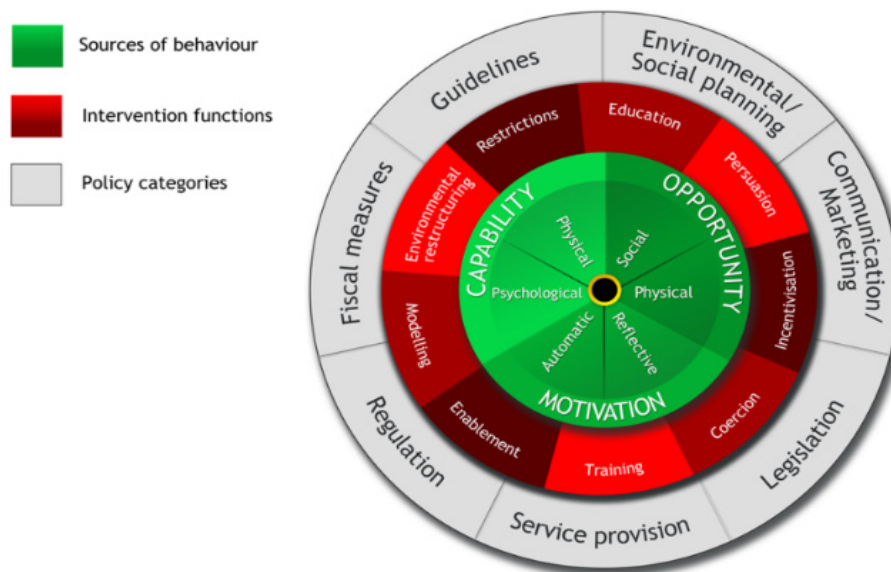


**Figure 4 Research method, scope and timescales**



## Using the COM-B model

We used the COM-B behaviour model to understand the barriers and facilitators of adult learning. The model highlights a range of automatic, non-conscious drivers of behaviour (emotions, heuristics and habit), rational drivers (judgement, capability and confidence), social drivers (culture, identity and norms), and the effect of external environmental factors (defaults, priorities and opportunities) which drive behaviour. We used the model to help us anticipate what to look for, by developing a hypothetical model based on what we and the DfE knew at the start of the research (see the Appendix), and then to understand what we found, during analysis after fieldwork was completed.



**Figure 5 COM-B Behaviour Model**

## Approach

We purposively sampled Level 2, 3, 4, and 5 learners for the interviews to achieve a mix of individuals, with quotas on: previous educational attainment; age; socio-economic

group; employment status; reason for taking up adult learning; whether in continuous education; whether learning online; whether from an ethnic minority group; gender and location.

We also purposively sampled non-learners for the focus groups, adults that had not done any learning since leaving full time education, with the same quotas as above and with additional quotas on: would potentially consider adult learning; living arrangements; and sector they are employed in. See the Appendix for achieved sample tables.

Level 2 and 3 learners were recruited from the Education & Skills Funding Agency's (EFSA) Individualised Learner Record (ILR) database, and Level 4 and 5 learners and non-learners were free found using a combination of our in-house recruitment team and a specialist recruitment agency. All prospective participants were screened, using a pre-agreed questionnaire, to determine eligibility to take part in the research (see the Appendix). Interview participants received £50 and focus group participants received £60 as appreciation for their time.

We interviewed Level 2, 3, 4, and 5 learners in-person at their home or a public place of their choosing or by telephone in instances where a face-to-face interview was not convenient for the participant. Focus groups with non-learners were conducted in central locations in London and Leeds. All interviews and groups were audio-recorded with the permission of participants for subsequent analysis. Researchers used a topic guide agreed with DfE to ensure consistency of topic coverage. The hypothetical behavioural model and insights from previous stages informed the development of the topic guides for the different stages.

Interviews with Level 2, 3, 4, and 5 learners included a journey mapping approach to support recall of learning experiences. The themes covered included:

- Background, including experiences of formal/informal education, parental education and employment, and job, career and family plans/history
- Attitudes towards learning and skills development
- Motivation and expectations of returning to education
- Triggers to returning to education
- Barriers and facilitators expected and/or experienced
- Key sources of support and/or information
- Recommendations for encouraging other adults to return to education.

Focus groups built on insights gained from interviews with Level 2-5 learners, and involved concept testing ideas from the earlier stages of the research. The themes covered in focus groups with non-learners included:

- Attitudes towards learning and skills development
- Approaches to considering a learning opportunity

- Barriers to learning
- Opportunities to get adults into learning by concept testing a mock prospectus

Topic guides and stimulus used in this research are included in the Appendix.

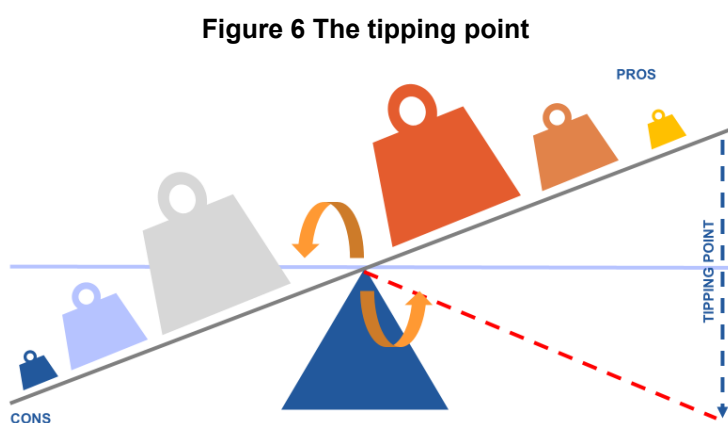
While this is a large-scale study, the findings are qualitative and thus the research does not seek to quantify or generalise the overall population. Rather, the research reflects a range of attitudes and behaviours that give insight into the factors influencing whether and how adults decide to learn.

### 3. Deciding to learn: the tipping point

This study has revealed a wide range of factors that influence adults' desires, intentions, and abilities to engage in adult learning. The financial cost of learning was often mentioned by adult learners as an important influence on their choices. How close the adult lived to educational courses and the convenience of public transport also emerged prominently. For those with school-aged children, the availability and cost of childcare were important determinants of whether they could learn in the evenings. It might be tempting to construct a list of barriers and facilitators, in priority order, for policy makers to address on the assumption that, once barriers are lowered and facilitators enhanced, many more adults would enrol in learning.

However, our research reveals that this approach would underplay the degree to which an adult's choice to become a learner is multi-faceted, complex, and personal. The study reveals that, for every learner, there exists a complex and unique relationship between their own perceptions of the personal benefits and personal costs of learning. The argument that underpins this report, therefore, is that the trigger to participate in learning for each adult comes at a tipping point where personal benefits outweigh personal costs. In this sense, the idea of 'costs' encompasses not only financial costs, but also time, opportunity, emotional, and other costs. For some, the balance is tipped as perceptions of the costs of learning diminish. For others, the balance tips as their perception of the benefits of the educational opportunity grows, even if the scale of objectifiable personal benefits cannot be said to have changed.

Figure 6 represents the balance between factors that are components of an adult's decision whether to study. This balance exists throughout an adult's learning journey, from before they consider learning, right through to their completion (or termination), of their course, and back again to considering learning. It depicts the balance between the personal benefits of learning (or 'pros') and the personal costs of learning (or 'cons'). An adult is tipped into, or out of, learning as the balance between costs and benefits changes. The weights on the balance represent the degree of influence that factors have for that adult.



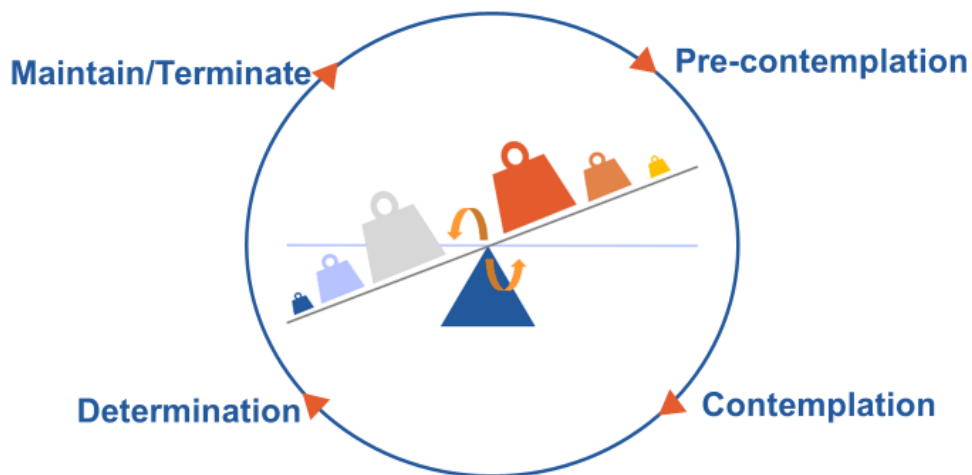
While the degree of influence any given factor has on an adult's learning choices varies at a given stage of their learning journey, this study reveals a high degree of commonality among adults on the nature of the factors. Through analysis, twelve factors of influence that impact on decisions have been identified, and are discussed throughout this report:

- Perceptions of psychological capability and control
- Social and cultural norms
- Previous experiences of education
- Physical capability and a diverse set of practical and circumstantial issues
- A desire for personal betterment
- Encouragement from influential people
- Financial position
- Flexibility of provision
- Quality of provision
- Having clear goals for learning

Each of these factors could be motivators, facilitators, or barriers, depending on the adult and their context.

Further, this study reveals that adults go through four stages of decision-making, and at each stage the nature and influence of the factors that form an adult's decision on the balance between the personal costs and benefits of learning change. Adults move through this journey at different stages, and it is not always linear, with adults moving back and forth between stages depending on their circumstances. At each stage, adults weigh-up costs and benefits, as illustrated in Figure 7 below. In this sense, the calculation of the costs and benefits of learning is ongoing and never concludes. The challenge to policymakers therefore is not only to tip the balance in favour of adult learning, but to ensure it remains tipped.

Figure 7 Decision-making stages



**Pre-contemplation:** In this stage, adults are not actively engaging with the possibilities of learning. They are often sustaining everyday life and seeking a sense of security. They may not be actively appraising aspects of their life that they do not find fulfilling and are therefore not considering learning as a pathway to personal or professional betterment. Where they are appraising aspects of their lives, they have not considered learning as an option to help them achieve their goals. Adults at this stage are still receptive to influence, particularly where this is aimed at raising their awareness of learning and encouraging them to consider it as a possibility.

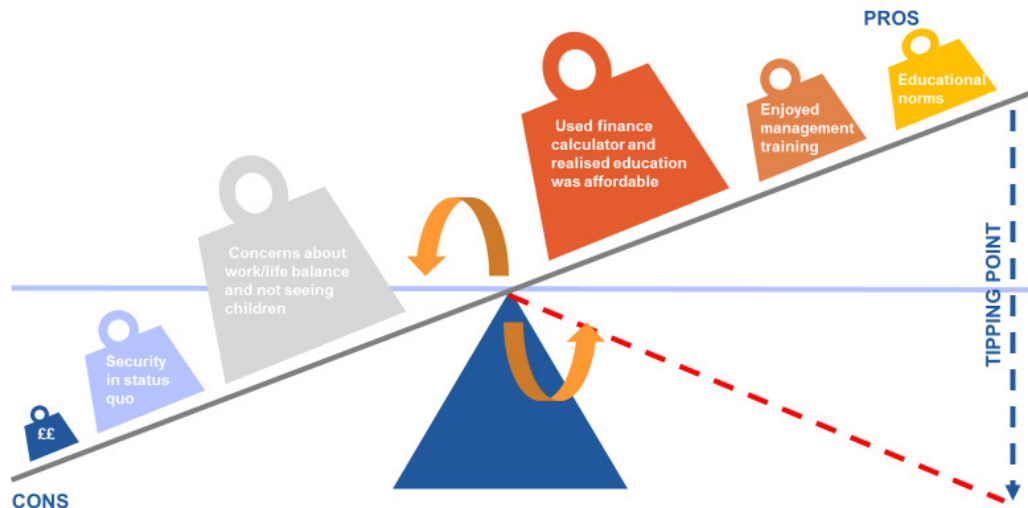
**Contemplation:** In this stage, adults have moved to the active consideration of the possibilities of learning and how learning might contribute to their personal betterment. They are exploring the practical and circumstantial aspects of learning, and are engaged in a process of evaluating the potential value of learning.

**Determination:** This is the stage at which adults decide to take-up learning and take action, such as enrolling onto a course. Adults act when their perception of the value of learning outweighs their perception of the challenges or costs to learning.

**Maintenance, completion, and early withdrawal:** Adults are now learning, but to maintain and complete learning, a range of barriers may need to be navigated and a sense of the ultimate value of learning must be maintained, to ensure adults do not withdraw from learning prior to completion.

Figure 8 provides an example of the factors of influence that impacted on decisions throughout the stages of change for one participant.

Figure 8 Example of the tipping point



This example is further illustrated in a case study, below.

### Stage 1, Level 5, Manchester

**Pre-contemplation:** Lisa comes from a family of teachers and her mother and sister have both often said she would be suited to the profession. Lisa's sister and mother have provided an insight into the experience of being a teacher, and into progression routes. Her mother retrained to be a teacher in later life. Despite these social influences, Lisa is enjoying success in her career as a restaurant manager. She has progressed well and is earning a wage she is happy with. Maintaining this current comfortable income is Lisa's priority now, and she is content to sustain her life as it is.

**Contemplation:** Lisa has been promoted in her job and as part of this she now has responsibility for training new restaurant managers. This becomes one of the highlights of her job and encourages her to contemplate the idea of a career in teaching as something she would be good at and would enjoy.

**Determination:** Lisa has a second child and becomes weary of the work-life balance in the catering sector. The hours are long and changeable, and she worries this is having a negative impact on spending quality time with her family. At this point there is a shift in priorities between money and work-life balance, connected to life-stage and spurred by the disruptive event of having a child. Lisa uses an online financial calculator tool and decides she could afford to train to be a teacher. She is not concerned that she would struggle with the learning as she is building on already positive early experiences of formal education at school and college. She enrolls on the course.

**Maintenance:** Enjoyment of the course, the fact that it is affordable, and having contact hours that work alongside childcare are enabling Lisa to maintain her learning. Tutors have confirmed that her placements will be flexible to fit around her childcare commitments, so this will not present a barrier to sustained engagement with the course.

The following four chapters deal with each of the decision-making stages in turn. Through them, the key factors of influence are discussed and exemplified, drawing on interview data. The key factors of influence at each stage are summarised in table 2 below.

**Table 2: Summary of key factors of influence at each decision-making stage**

<b>Decision-making stage</b>	<b>Key factors of influence</b>
Pre-contemplation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceptions of psychological capability and control</li> <li>• Social and cultural norms</li> <li>• Previous experiences of education</li> <li>• Physical capability and a diverse set of practical and circumstantial issues</li> </ul>
Contemplation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceptions of psychological capability and control</li> <li>• A desire for personal betterment</li> <li>• Encouragement from influential people</li> <li>• Self-perception of capabilities for learning</li> <li>• Physical capability and a diverse set of practical and circumstantial issues</li> </ul>
Determination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial position</li> <li>• Perceptions of psychological capability and control</li> </ul>
Maintenance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical capability and a diverse set of practical and circumstantial issues</li> <li>• Flexibility of provision</li> <li>• Quality of provision</li> <li>• Perceptions of psychological capability and control</li> <li>• Having clear goals for learning</li> </ul>



## 4. Pre-contemplation

### Factors of influence during pre-contemplation

Before actively contemplating learning, most adults are focused on sustaining their lives and do not see personal value in learning. The pre-contemplation stage is characterised by an emphasis on sustaining an existing financial, emotional, social, and/or professional situation. Therefore, other life priorities take precedence over personal or professional development, or engagement with change and disruption:

*'I was just plodding along really...you know, just getting on with it.'* (Level 2, female, administrator at NHS)

Pre-contemplation is a stage when adults are not necessarily seeking to appraise or critically engage with aspects of their lives which they may not find fulfilling. If they are seeking change, they have not considered learning as an option to help them achieve their goals.

For some participants, limited understanding and experience of adult learning, of its availability and of what it entails, is a significant barrier to contemplating it as a possibility. This lack of knowledge means that, if probed, participants in the pre-contemplation stage are more likely to make assumptions that barriers to learning are insurmountable, which in turn encourages them to switch off any consideration of learning. The likelihood of learning being on an adult's radar is also affected by other factors of influence:

- self-perception of psychological capability and control;
- cultural and social norms;
- previous educational experiences;
- and physical capability and a diverse set of practical and circumstantial issues.

Each of these is discussed in turn in this chapter.

### Psychological capability and control

In pre-contemplation, the extent to which adults feel they have control of their lives shapes their dispositions towards contemplating learning in the future. Where adults do not see themselves as in control, it is more difficult for them to contemplate learning because they cannot conceive of how it could improve their lives. Some participants with complex mental and physical health conditions reported being at the mercy of their condition in the past, unable to engage with the idea of making changes:

*'It was partly to do with the length of time that I had been out and feeling a bit rusty, but also with me, because of an illness I've had until recently, I was worried about interacting with people.'* (Level 2, male, not working due to disability)

This creates a psychological capability barrier to contemplating learning. Participants who lack internal control of their lives are more likely to be preoccupied with the constant challenges of everyday life. For them, the impetus to contemplate learning is more likely to come from life-disrupting events such as being diagnosed with a health condition, moving to a new house, changing job or getting a divorce. Through these events they are encouraged to reappraise their lives, and this creates space for learning to become a consideration.

In contrast, participants who perceived themselves to have a high degree of control over their lives found it natural to contemplate learning once they sought to change an aspect of their lives. The trigger to contemplating learning does not need to be as disruptive or life-changing, as these adults are more likely to have deeply engrained beliefs in the value of education as a way of changing their lives:

*'I wanted to be a doctor when I was a kid. I just liked helping people I guess. You know, saving a life is a big thing...[I started to think] if I don't find a good job then I'm going to go back to education.'* (Level 3, male, two part-time jobs)

This participant naturally moved to contemplating learning when he realised he could not get the job he wanted without more education.

## **Social and cultural norms**

Social and cultural norms define whether an adult feels enabled or inhibited by their surrounding context to pursue learning opportunities. Parental influences on attitudes to education and work can create a set of norms that predispose adults to view education as valuable or not. Where familial context has equipped participants with a sense of the value of learning, they can be tipped more easily into contemplating learning at a time when they are seeking change.

*'I always knew it was possible to go back into education because of my mum.'*  
(Level 3, female, administrator in medical sector)

*'Everyone in my house went to university, and obviously having teaching people [parents who were teachers] it's around a lot more so it's something I'm more aware of and what the benefits are of having an education.'* (Level 5, female, carer)

Familial experiences can also instil the idea that learning is a viable way to achieve personal and professional goals. The visibility of other adult learners provides tangible examples of the possibilities of learning as an adult, grounding individuals' understandings of the benefits of learning in the lived experiences of others:

*'Seeing them do well. It just gave me the sense that if I tried hard enough I can do anything myself...they both succeeded without university.'* (Level 3, female, bar staff/hospitality)

The presence of norms on the benefits of learning does not necessarily mean an individual will actively contemplate adult learning. However, it means that the adult already sees education as beneficial, at least in theory, and therefore acts as a precursor for an adult entertaining the notion of learning as a route to personal and professional development.

Conversely, growing up in a household where education and work were not valued can negatively impact on the likelihood of an adult viewing education as valuable. In some cases, there was a wider cultural aspect to this. For example, a participant from a South Asian background spoke about the low value placed on educating girls in her family and wider cultural context:

*'They never supported us in doing any homework or anything and they're quite traditional. They think that girls shouldn't be educated, you should go, you know, get married as soon as you can.'* (Level 3, female, administrator/project manager for local authority)

This participant had to fight against these cultural and household norms before contemplating learning. For adults with similar influences to move to the active contemplation of learning, it was necessary to reconsider the value of education.

Further, the impact of familial views of learning was not straightforward. For instance, growing up in a household where learning is not valued could lead participants to rebel and to seek a different path from their parents.

Similarly, positive parental attitudes towards learning could also be rebelled against. For some, positive parental pressure negatively affected their commitment to academic study and encouraged them to rebel against others' educational expectations of them:

*'I didn't like the system...nothing about it...it's like the herd following the herd. I pretty much rebelled against the whole thing.'* (Level 3, male, personal trainer).

There are also examples of adults being discouraged from contemplating learning by chance encounters with others or through the influence of their peer group. Some reported pressure from peer groups to focus on family commitments, or financial

constraints. Several women reported giving up learning in the past due to family commitments or pressures from a male partner to stay home and attend to childcare and housework:

*'If I had my life again I would do as much studying as I could in the earlier part of my life, but as a woman, things happen, having children, being married and that just cuts it for you...I know what puts women off, its family life... we were married young and he was jealous...he didn't want to support me with it. It seemed to stress him out seeing me study.'* (Level 3, female, support worker)

Ideas about women's roles and fear of being a 'selfish parent' could be significant barriers to contemplating learning. Taking time for oneself away from family life was internalised as unjustifiable by many women. Participants from lower income households are more likely to view education as a privilege, with financial investment in education running contrary to the need to provide a stable financial environment for the family. Again, this is more likely to be a barrier for female participants:

*'There's been times when I've wanted to quit, I've been feeling guilty about the impact on the household, there's no impact really, it's my guilt in that sense.'* (Level 4, female, teaching assistant)

## Previous experiences of education

An adult's past experiences of education are key determinants in their self-belief and identity as a capable learner, and of their likelihood of actively contemplating learning. Perception of education as a tool for empowerment is derived from positive past educational experiences, or participants' feeling as though they did not reach their potential during previous learning endeavours. These experiences predisposed adults to see education as a means to personal improvement. Therefore, if they sought change, there was a higher likelihood of them contemplating learning:

*'I think education is everything, not only because you want to reach a certain destination, for example a job, I feel like education is more important than that, 'learning is like breathing. You only stop when you die.'* (Level 4, male, trainee accountant)

For these participants, the process of actively contemplating learning may be postponed due to financial, personal and familial circumstance, but it is only on hold:

*'I had to make that decision that I basically became a carer at seventeen. So, I had to look after my mum, so I had to give up what I wanted to do.'* (Level 2, female, not working)

Negative and unfulfilling past experiences at school are linked to low educational self-esteem, and desire to prove people wrong. Not having taken school seriously could have two impacts at the pre-contemplation stage.

First, it could be a barrier to an individual's self-definition as a learner and ability to see themselves as academic:

*'I went through most of my life thinking I was thick, that I couldn't even begin to imagine doing an essay, let alone a degree.'* (Level 2, male, personal advisor for care leavers and ex-offenders)

*'I've had so many knock backs over the years. I just feel like I'm not going to pass my exams. Sometimes I wonder whether I have like learning difficulties or something.'* (Level 2, female, temporary administrative staff)

Participants with physical and mental health conditions were most likely to have low self-perception of their educational abilities.

Secondly, past experiences left some participants feeling unsatisfied with their overall achievements or experiences in the education sector, resulting in a lasting sense of not having fulfilled their potential, be it due to immaturity, family circumstance, or pressure. These experiences created unfulfilled aspirations for educational achievement, which predisposes adults to contemplate learning at a future point:

*'I just got my three A-Cs and that's all I really cared about, when at school. But it left me with a feeling...like 'I was hungry for it, it was like unfinished business.'* (Level 4, female, full time student)

Self-definition and sense of self-worth shapes the degree to which adults can envisage a different world for themselves. If people fundamentally believe in themselves and their ability to reach their aspirations and goals, when cognitive capacity to think about education is freed up they are more willing or able to contemplate education as an option. Others must work harder to imagine themselves as learners because of low self-confidence and limited belief in their capacity to progress and act on their desires.

## **Physical capability**

A lack of critical engagement with the practicalities of going back to education in the pre-contemplation phase means many adults feel the physical obstacles to them going into education are insurmountable. When asked to reflect on their views of physical barriers to contemplating learning, participants spoke of underpinning assumptions that it was practically impossible because of: a lack of employer flexibility; a lack of money; difficulties arranging childcare; and that their health/mobility issues would prevent them

from attending classes. These are assumptions and not the product of active contemplation now, but they have an impact on the likelihood of participants entering the contemplative stage. Adults assume that studying is outside of the realms of possibility and therefore deny themselves the possibility of entertaining the notion of education.

Participants with a lack of familial support, or with physical and mental health conditions, were most likely to see learning as a practical impossibility at the pre-contemplation stage. They were also more likely to have physical or mental health conditions and to be stuck in a mind-set where they felt consumed or confined by personal circumstance:

*'I have to plan everywhere I go because I can't walk very far... the pain is too much. I used to go to a course in Harrow but it took me an hour on the bus and by the time I got there I was exhausted. I just thought, I can't do that again.'* (Level 2, female, not working due to health issues)

This feeds into a mind-set that education is not viable based on assumptions that there will not be something that caters for their needs.

## Differences by level of learning

Level 2 and 3 learners were less likely to have used educational courses at various points throughout their careers to progress in their jobs. These learners tend to be more *tentative* about the learning experience, having to grow in confidence through the process of education before accepting themselves as capable learners. In contrast, Level 4 and 5 learners are more confident and are more likely to view education as an enjoyable, viable and practical tool for self and professional development. Moving into the contemplative stage might, therefore, require less of a psychological shift as the confidence around academic capacity is already in place. However, level 4 and 5 learners are also more likely to recognise the demands of learning at higher levels as the perceived time and cost commitment is higher at level 4 and 5 study. They might therefore be more affected by self-perception of their physical and practical capabilities.

## Summary

This group are likely to be important to increasing the numbers of adults in learning, and moving adults out of this stage is a considerable challenge. During the pre-contemplation stage adults are not actively engaged in thinking about learning. However, adults can be pre-disposed to moving into the contemplation stage, depending on several factors of influence:

- Self-perception of capability and control.

- Adults who feel they lack control over their lives may require a disruptive life event to begin to contemplate learning.
- Meanwhile those who feel they have control over their lives may be more able to visualise learning as a route to achieving life goals.
- Social and cultural norms, particularly parental views on education, have a powerful impact on underlying views of learning. They can impact on propensity to view learning as a route to achieving life goals.
  - This link is not easy to predict. For instance, negative familial views on education may translate into a negative perception, or act as a spur to value education.
  - Women with family responsibilities can face social and cultural norms regarding the acceptability of taking time away from family to learn.
- Previous education experience is closely linked to awareness and understanding of education as a possibility. Where adults lack knowledge and experience of education, they are more likely to make assumptions that barriers to learning are insurmountable, which in turn encourages them to switch off any consideration of learning.
- Where physical barriers, such as a lack of money or childcare needs, were viewed as insurmountable this could switch adults off to the possibilities of learning.

Given that adults are not actively considering education as a viable or beneficial option in the pre-contemplation phase, they may be reluctant to actively engage with information relating to learning opportunities. Instead, the focus for any communications needs to be on aiding subconscious recognition, awareness and discovery of adult learning opportunities in a tacit way.

This chapter suggests two key interventions at the pre-contemplation stage. First, to raise the profile of learning in adults' consciousness and encourage them to consider it as a possibility. Communications that strive to create a national culture in which adult learning is an ordinary part of life, where learning is something that adults cannot help but know about and come across, are crucial to increasing the number of adults who are actively contemplating learning. Peripheral communications, positioned in spaces adults will encounter as they go about their everyday lives, are a trigger for contemplation:

*'I literally was wandering around the Job Centre and I looked at it by accident. So, if I hadn't, by accident, seen that poster, I would have never known about the course, I wouldn't be here right now, I wouldn't have done those courses and I'd probably, at this time, be in another crappy job.'* (Level 3, male, not working)

The research inferred from participant accounts that communication that asks questions and gently encourages self-reflection, rather than actively marketing adult education, are most likely to be effective at this stage.

Second, participants who lack internal control of their lives are more likely to be preoccupied with the constant challenges of everyday life. For them, the impetus to contemplate learning is more likely to come from life-disrupting events such as being diagnosed with a health condition, moving to a new house, changing job or getting a divorce. Through these events they are encouraged to reappraise their lives, and this creates space for learning to become a consideration. Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG) needs to be available, and signposted, so that adults can be informed about learning once they enter this reappraisal stage. This includes signposting adults to services that will build self-confidence.



## 5. Contemplation

### Factors of influence at the contemplation stage

While in the contemplation stage, adults have begun to buy into the value of learning and to view it as something that could benefit them now. They are, however, navigating a complex decision-making process through which they weigh up the pros and cons of their options. Information at this stage needs to be communicated in a way that encourages adults to decide whether the benefits of learning outweigh the costs. Their needs broadly fall into two types: aspiration/inspirational needs; and practical needs. The dominant factors of influence at the contemplation stage are:

- A desire for personal betterment
- Encouragement from influential people
- Self-perception of capabilities for learning
- Physical capability and a diverse set of practical and circumstantial issues

Each of these connects with a desire for personal betterment, which is described in the following section.

### Personal betterment

When contemplating study, adults are focused on the role learning might play in their personal betterment. 'Personal betterment' is defined individually, and often closely related to work and careers. For many, learning is the pathway to promotion and progression:

*'I genuinely believed that the sky was the limit in terms of my career and without that [the course] I wouldn't be able to progress. And that was made very clear to me in my reviews.'* (Level 3, female, not working)

For others, a new career is the goal:

*'It wasn't the career I wanted to do, it was stressful, I wasn't enjoying it, so ...I asked for a demotion...back down to first assistant again and that's when I started to have the time to look around for a different career.'* (Level 2, male, personal advisor for care leavers and ex-offenders)

*'I wanted to move out of the dead-end job I was in.'* (Level 3, male, delivery driver)

Some seek to avoid career stagnation or even redundancy:

*'So, the company folded, I got made redundant and I was like, 'Well, I'm out of a job, but at the same time, maybe this is a chance for me to start doing something that I actually like.'* (Level 3, male, not working)

For others, personal betterment is about other types of value, like mental sharpness, love of the subject, or how their own learning could positively impact their children:

*'I thought it was important to show to my daughter that even though I'm a single parent, you know, even though your circumstances aren't blooming you can always work. So, she's always had that association, you know, I never ever wanted her to have a mum who's staying at home and claiming benefits.'* (Level 5, female, training instructor)

*'To get me out the house, because my mental health team were very keen that I get out the house. Sitting around the house wasn't doing me any good. Secondly, for academic interest, I wanted to stretch myself a little bit and learn something new.'* (Level 2, male, not working due to disability)

The idea that learning will in some way better them, and enable them to fulfil both extrinsic and intrinsic goals, is central to adults' active contemplation of learning opportunities.

## **Interactions with influential and trusted people.**

Receiving encouragement from others is important in forming a view of the place of learning in personal betterment. Others' advice and experiences are often crucial in adults arriving at the view that learning will contribute to their personal betterment. Adults often crystallise, or even consider for the first time, the role learning plays in their betterment because of advice and encouragement from others. This advice and encouragement may come from people in their immediate social sphere, but it may also come from people they meet through chance encounters and new experiences.

As adults contemplate their learning, employers can be influential advocates, or powerful opponents to their decision to pursue learning. A perceived lack of employer support or flexibility will often be the greatest barrier to learning for adults who work, as they feel unable to juggle work, life and studying responsibilities:

*'My workplace at that time wouldn't let me do what I needed to do to get my level three qualifications. I kind of gave up on that.'* (Level 3, female, not working)

Family members and friends can also be influential, for example through offering opportunities to have a taster experience of a career to inform decisions about learning:

*'I spoke to one of my mum's friends, who's actually a primary school teacher at the school I volunteered at, and she said, 'Why don't you just come in to school for five days and do it?' So, I was like, 'Fine. Let's do that then.' Then I did, I absolutely loved it.'* (Level 2, female, school receptionist)

Even one-off encounters can be highly influential and encourage engagement:

*'I was at the pub that I worked at and one of my customers was talking about the fact that she'd just signed up for an access course down the road. It just made me think, 'What am I doing with my life?', so in my break, I walked down to the college and just signed up. I was two weeks late to the course, but they still let me join.'* (Level 3, female, works in hospitality/bar staff)

In each case what is provided is the support to envisage and believe in the value and feasibility of learning. These opportunities are influential factors in determining if adults become determined to learn.

## Psychological Capability

As potential learners contemplate learning, they internally weigh-up views on their own personal capabilities to undertake and complete a course. Levels of confidence determine the type of learning opportunities a person seeks. For example, an adult with low self-confidence might be more motivated to explore distance learning, while someone who is isolated due to health conditions might explore classroom based options so that they can engage socially with others.

While contemplating learning, adults also weigh up their ability to juggle workload, study and other responsibilities before deciding whether learning is possible. This evaluation includes the perceived personal, social and financial cost of learning. For many, an assessment of their physical and mental aptitude plays a role in determining whether they see learning as feasible. In these instances, many learners go through a process of overcoming past conceptions of their abilities:

*'Helping out on trips [with child's school] kind of boosted my confidence a little bit and introduced me to possibilities of going back to college and getting the qualification...I think it was knowing I was doing things right and the work and things like that.'* (Level 3, female, teaching assistant)

## Physical Capability

Regardless of the desire to take-up learning, during the contemplation stage adults are also considering many practical factors. Finance is very important, as a barrier or a

facilitator. It was a source of concern for participants, and raised issues concerning benefit claims and debt:

*'Financially, I don't know how I'm going to support myself. Can I still claim benefits while being at uni, can I not? It's a grey area, especially for older students. That's probably my next challenge, and obviously do I tell them I'm on benefits while I'm doing a level three, or just keep my mouth shut?'* (Level 2, female, not employed)

*'This is one of the things that put me off a degree, initially, because I couldn't leave my job because I didn't want to be a student again because I was still paying off debts anyway. So, I couldn't afford to go to university and stop working full time and stop that income and then get into a large debt again.'* (Level 2, male, personal advisor for care leavers and ex-offenders)

For some, the offer to have a course paid for was the trigger that moved them into the determination phase as they perceived themselves to be fortunate:

*'Because I'm not working at the moment, I don't have to pay, so I thought this is such a privilege. So, I'm going to complete it.'* (Level 2, female, unemployed)

The significance of finance changes once the value of education has been recognised by an individual. It becomes a practical issue that they need to find a solution to, rather than an assumed insurmountable barrier as in the pre-contemplation stage.

The work patterns of a partner, or availability of support from family or friends, are key determinants of whether learning is viewed as feasible for those with children:

*'That was something I had to sort out before I even applied for the course because I knew, that if it wasn't going to work childcare wise I just wouldn't be able to do it. I needed to know how late the lectures went on, whether they were going to be on the same days of the week or on different days then I wouldn't be able to get a nursery place that would allow me to swap days, so those things were the most important things.'* (Level 5, female, full time student)

While travel time and travel costs are factored into evaluations of a learning opportunity, this often relates to whether an adult feels out-of-place within an institution. Familiarity and proximity provide a sense of comfort:

*'I just felt like I'd rather go somewhere that I know and feel comfortable knowing it's only ten minutes up the road than doing something online. I don't know, I just think it's a bit more of a comfort thing, like, if you're paying for something, you want to know that you're paying for something good and worth it.'* (Level 2, female, school receptionist)

*'They all tend to be over the other side of Coventry, adult education courses. We used to have a college this side of Coventry and that got knocked down and they built houses on it. It sounds snobbish, but it's the not very nice areas, the more deprived areas tend to be where they hold education classes...It's the unfamiliar areas and areas with not very nice reputations.'* (Level 2, female, freelance IT teacher)

Adults need support in finding opportunities that work for them in their local context, and may require signposting to relevant sources of information.

## Differences by level of learning

### Levels 2 and 3

Those studying at Levels 2 and 3 are typically newer to adult learning and tend to be more concerned with their abilities to cope with the learning environment. At the contemplation stage, they require more support in shifting their perspectives about their capabilities rather than in achieving specific career outcomes. Trusted sources of support encourage adults to change their view of themselves from a non-learner, to a tentative learner. Trusted sources of support or information could come from the immediate social realm, workplace environment, from provider websites, or careers advisors. This support enables the learner to change their self-perception and identity, which creates a condition of possibility for learning and makes them more determined to learn.

For learners at Levels 2 and 3, opportunities to connect with providers for advice or open days helps change nascent ideas into clearly defined plans. At this stage, learners need help with making the idea of learning real. This includes opportunities to see the institution itself, or support in mapping out how they can achieve their career ambitions:

*'[At the open day the provider] did a good job at promoting themselves and giving information about what was required.'* (Level 3, male, works in security)

*'Open days are really easy. You just, like, go online to that uni that you want to go to, and book yourself onto an open day. If I didn't have the experience I wouldn't have [registered]. It was like, 'This is the course, and this is what you'll get from the course.'* (Level 2, female, school receptionist)

At the contemplation stage, support in applying for financing, or advice on different learning formats are useful facilitators. If learners at Level 2 or 3 are unable to access the information and support they need to ground aspirations for learning in a practical understanding, they might not consider enrolling:

*'I would have preferred to find out more about the actual content we would cover each week, but couldn't get access to it, or anyone in the college to discuss with. I didn't feel I could do the course anywhere else locally. But it was very off-putting and I'm sure other people didn't register as a result.'* (Level 2, male, not working)

Learners at Level 2 or 3 also seek to understand how existing qualifications are relevant for the next stage of learning, for instance for those progressing to Level 4.

## **Levels 4 and 5**

When contemplating learning, the perceived higher demands of Levels 4 and 5 learning mean that adults seek more specific information about what the course will entail and how it will benefit them. Level 4 or 5 courses require more cognitive and physical resources from learners, meaning they are more likely to have to go part-time at work and suffer a loss of income. This means that contemplation of study is more intimately tied to perceptions of the balance between cost and benefit. This is both a perceptual and practical jump. Learners feel that the courses require more time and cognitive capacity, because assignments are more formal and they must navigate a more academic system where they need to reference their work. Learners also tend to report different time commitments between courses at Levels 2 or 3 and Levels 4 or 5. This might be the difference between attending a course after work one evening a week, or attending a course which requires two to three days of contact time each week.

Learners at Level 4 or 5 have many of the same information and support needs as learners at Level 2 or 3 but seek more information on the precise content of a course before committing. As the time and financial commitment for Level 4 or 5 learning are generally greater than for Levels 2 or 3, speaking to those who have done the course provides a clear understanding of: the course requirements; others' experiences on the course; and opportunities for professional growth that the course may provide. This enables potential learners at Level 4 or 5 to make informed decisions about the benefit of undertaking the course in relation to the loss of income associated with undertaking study, and evaluate the relative value of the learning.

Opportunities to volunteer, or shadow in their field of interest, enabled participants to gain a clearer understanding of what they are aiming towards:

*'I mailed every speech and language service locally to ask about whether I could shadow for free. I spent two days in hospital cleft palate team...it helped me think about the practical aspects of the degree because there is quite a large practical component to it [and] made me reflect on how I dealt with people, just seeing resources they use and gave me more insight.'* (Level 5, female, full time student)

Without specific information or support that aids understanding of the requirements, and real-world benefits of learning, potential Level 4 or 5 learners will not go beyond contemplation.

Adults can be deterred from course enrolment if they only have a vague understanding of: what it is they will be learning; the requirements of enrolment; and the duration of the course before qualification. Those with little to no awareness of where to seek advice, will be unable to create a tangible plan in their mind about learning, and will be most adversely affected by this lack of information and support. Table 3 presents the main information and support needs for the different levels of learning.

**Table 3: Information requirements and support requirements by level of learning at the contemplation stage**

<b>Levels 2 and 3</b>	<b>Levels 4 and 5</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial encouragement from a range of sources: family, friends, acquaintances, colleagues and employers.</li> <li>• Chances to hear about opportunities in the working environment</li> <li>• Support to shift perspectives about their capabilities rather than in achieving specific career outcomes.</li> <li>• Opportunities to connect with providers for advice or open days</li> <li>• Support in applying for financing and advice on different learning formats</li> <li>• Guidance to understand how existing qualifications are relevant for the next stage of learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The same information and support needs as learners at Level 2 or 3, but with more specific information about what the course will entail and how it will benefit them to inform a cost-benefit analysis.</li> <li>• Speaking to those who have done the course to understand course requirements, experiences and outcomes.</li> <li>• Work shadowing provides opportunities to visualise day-to-day experiences in a new career, where retraining is being contemplated</li> </ul>

## Summary

While in the contemplation stage, adults have begun to buy into the value of learning and to view it as something that could benefit them at this time. However, they are engaged in a complex process of weighing up the costs and benefits of their options. The key factors of influence at this stage are:

- a desire for personal betterment, both related to work and careers or other types of value, such as mental sharpness or setting a good example for children
- encouragement from influential people;
- adults' perception of their own psychological capability to learn; and
- adults' perception of their physical capability to learn, as they contemplate a diverse set of practical and circumstantial issues.

Adults do not arrive at the view that they should learn alone. Instead, many are extensively influenced by those around them, including family members, friends, employers and acquaintances. Encouragement is important in forming an adult's view of the place of learning in personal betterment. In the contemplation phase adults need to be surrounded by a supportive and enabling environment which encourages them to see the personal benefit of learning, or increases their self-belief that they are capable of learning.

Provision of courses needs to be as flexible as possible, so that adults can see the wide variety of courses and formats of learning. This enables them to imagine different options for themselves, without having to figure out the practicalities of whether and how they could fit learning into their lives. Adults need sufficient information to understand the requirements of learning and potential benefits. However, at this stage some adults can be deterred by information which is too specific as it makes the decision to enrol feel too complex, and focuses their attention on the multiple barriers or challenges that they face. It reminds them of the barriers to learn, before they have fully committed themselves to the personal or professional value of learning. This is more likely to be the case for adults learning at Level 2 and Level 3.

At this stage adults want to know the personal costs and benefits of undertaking learning. They require enough information and support at this stage to envisage the experience of learning, so that they have a practical understanding of how it will alter their daily lives. They seek information on:

- the cost of the course;
- the type of financial support that is available;
- the financial, personal and professional benefits of different courses



- the support that is available from wider services e.g. for those with mental health difficulties; and
- opportunities to try-out learning.

A lack of access to support and advice will mean that adults do not have sufficient knowledge and understanding of the impacts and benefits of undertaking education, which will act as a barrier to enrolment.

## 6. Determination

### Factors of influence during determination

Once adults are invested in the unique value they have attributed to learning, they are less likely to view practical or physical challenges as barriers to learning, but rather as problems that need to be solved. For many adults, perception of the value of learning is precipitated by life events that introduce the possibility of learning. For example, having more time available due to key life changes such as retirement, a reduction in caring responsibilities, or redundancy. Others have a new ability to renegotiate time due, for example, to a reappraisal of resources, changes at work, or changes in the distribution of household responsibilities:

*'I had been thinking about doing a midwifery degree for a while. But it's something I felt would need to wait until my kids were grown up and no longer dependent on me.'* (Level 3, female, part time health care assistant)

When adults determine to enrol in education, their investment in their own personal and professional futures overrides immediate loss of time or resources. In this stage, adults are future-facing and willing to invest financially, socially, and personally because of a belief in the future pay-off of learning. The value of learning to them remains personal, and may concern career progression, career change, improved confidence, or enjoyment of a subject:

*'I could see from other personal trainers that it was worth going for the course ...to progress my business.'* (Level 3, male, personal trainer)

Having considered the costs and benefits of learning, and the practicalities, adults act when they perceive the personal benefits to outweigh the personal costs. The influential factors on causing the balance to tip are:

- financial position and the availability of financial resources; and
- psychological and physical capabilities, and the availability of emotional and practical support

### Financial position and the availability of financial resources

Financial support determines to a significant degree whether a learner sees themselves as able to enrol in learning. Access to finance disproportionately impacts on those in lower income brackets as they are less able to maintain living standards while in education. Having the ability to self-fund and maintain financial quality of life were key

facilitators to enrolment. However, those in lower income brackets require greater access to financial support or flexible working arrangements to minimise the loss of earnings:

*'I don't think I need a lot of support because my work was so good about it. They sort of were my support system if you like.'* (Level 5, female, not working)

Availability of loans, bursaries, grants are key facilitators to enrolment. Without them, many individuals across all levels, working or not working, would not be able to enrol on courses:

*'I am the last year that still gets the NHS bursary so I don't pay any course fees.... [without it] there's no way I'd have the money available to pay upfront or make the commitment to spend £27k when I'm not even sure when or if I'll get a job at the end of it.'* (Level 5, female, full time student)

Those from lower income brackets and those with children were the most likely to require confirmation of additional support before enrolling. Those with lower incomes were more likely to need access to maintenance loans to survive:

*'My biggest issue is the work issue...this is part time course so they don't offer maintenance loans and quite honestly it is too much and I am really dreading the thought of the next 2 years having to work full time and having to take the class full time but I don't have much of a choice unless I change things midstream.'* (Level 3, female, mortgage broker and personal assistant)

Where adults face a lack of financial support and employer flexibility, this can be a death-knell to enrolment, particularly for potential learners at Levels 4 and 5, even if the participant desperately wants to learn.

*'To become a fully qualified counsellor, I must do the Level 4 course, but because I work in admin, it's not like I can do flexible hours. So, I just don't see how I can go on to do it. I have a mortgage to pay, and I just don't see how I'd be able to survive financially.'* (Level 3, female, administrator at NHS)

Single parents required the most familial or peer support to be able to study because for many the costs of childcare would prohibit learning.

## **Psychological and physical capabilities: availability of emotional and practical support**

Emotional and practical support are equally as important as financial support when adults are deciding to enrol in learning. Practical support and resources from friends and family enable adult learners to enrol in education. This may be an acceptance of shouldering

more of the burden of running the household, or providing childcare while the adult is in class:

*'Without my dad looking after the kids for a night a week, I'd've had to find a babysitter which would have been at least £40-50 a week...it would have just made it impossible.'* (Level 3, female, full time carer)

As the potential learner will face greater demands on their time while learning, knowing that they are surrounded by a supportive environment is comforting and convinces them that they will be able to cope:

*'Without the support from my friends, I could just never have done this course. They made me feel from the beginning that they'd be there for me, even help with looking after the kids if I needed it. And in the times where I've really struggled, it's just been so helpful having someone to vent to.'* (Level 5, female, works for NHS)

This can act as the final trigger to enrolment.

Conversely, negative reactions from an immediate social sphere about the decision to enrol could present a barrier to enrolment:

*'To be honest, I didn't tell my mum and dad about going back into education, because when I was thinking about it they were so harsh with me, telling me that I was flaky, that I'd fail. That I was putting my kids' financial security at risk. So, I didn't want to tell them about it until I'd passed the course.'* (Level 5, female, works for NHS)

## **Types of support and information needed**

At the determination stage differences between level 2/3 and level 4/5 learners were not apparent in our analysis. Once they have determined to pursue learning, all adults require easy access to in-depth, specific and practical information that supports their transition into education. Table 4 summarises the types of information needed to support the final decision to enrol in learning. This includes: time commitments; practical pre-requisites that must be in place to begin learning; the format of teaching and learning; flexibilities offered by the education institution; sources of ongoing support; and practical information and advice for learning as an adult.

**Table 4: Types of information needed at the determination stage**

<p><b>Time:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contact hours and time estimations for self-directed learning</li> <li>• Average length of time spent on assignments / homework</li> <li>• Time spent travelling to and from course</li> <li>• Length of study (years)</li> <li>• Years before professional pay-off</li> </ul>	<p><b>Practical pre-requisites:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to funding and financial benefits as a learner (i.e. travel cards, bursaries etc.)</li> <li>• Background reading to prepare for course</li> <li>• Information and support throughout the registration and enrolment process</li> <li>• Expectations on the first days of the course</li> <li>• Childcare arrangements</li> <li>• Finance calculator</li> </ul>	<p><b>Learning format:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Level of expectation around classroom vs self-directed learning</li> <li>• Access to resources and libraries (including opening hours)</li> <li>• Format of online tools and support</li> <li>• Access to tutor support or mentoring</li> <li>• Access to peer support</li> </ul>
<p><b>Flexibility:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deferral procedures (if time commitments get too much)</li> <li>• Ways to catch up on lessons if they have had to miss them due to work commitments</li> <li>• Information concerning extenuating circumstances</li> </ul>	<p><b>Support services available:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Careers advice &amp; Taster days</li> <li>• Opportunities for work placements</li> <li>• Personal/emotional support or pastoral care</li> <li>• Mentoring</li> <li>• Employer support and flexibility</li> <li>• Funding for both course fees and maintenance</li> </ul>	<p><b>Expectations as an adult learner:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information on how to cope with transitioning into learning</li> <li>• List of resources and information</li> <li>• 'How to' study skills guides, e.g. on referencing, essay or assignment writing</li> </ul>

## Summary

Once an adult has determined the personal benefit of going into education, they are less likely to view practical or physical challenges as barriers to learning, but rather as problems that need to be solved. Although adults have bought-in to the value of education at this stage, many display anxieties about how they will acclimatise to education, and they need assurances that they will be able to emotionally and practically cope with the demands of learning. There is a clear role for information, advice, guidance (IAG) and support at this stage. Adults require very specific information, including the benefits and difficulties of learning, so that they can accurately appraise the real impact of study on their lives. This includes:

- Detailed and specific information about what a course costs, and a detailed estimate for associated costs of travel materials and earnings that are foregone.
- Detailed information about different courses and learning formats to help them to determine the best option for their circumstances.
- Assurances and confirmation that additional support is in place, such as familial support with childcare and confirmation of financial support.
- 'Real life' accounts of the experiences of other learners, including descriptions of any barriers faced and how these were overcome.

## 7. Maintenance

### Factors of influence during maintenance

This section describes the factors that influence adult engagement in learning once a course has been started. The maintenance phase is about how learning can be sustained and successfully completed once an adult has enrolled on a course. It concerns factors that influence the continuation or completion of courses, including instances where adults have withdrawn from learning prior to completion. It clarifies the support adults have accessed to maintain and successfully complete learning. This chapter discusses overarching factors that were influential for participants during this phase of learning, including:

- physical capability;
- flexibility of provision;
- quality of provision;
- psychological capability; and
- having clear goals for learning.

### Physical capability

Participant accounts highlight the continuation of a range of physical and practical barriers to learning that had recurred throughout the earlier phases of decision-making. For adults involved in this study, physical infrastructure and the learning context often played a role in the maintenance and successful completion of learning. The most commonly cited practical difficulties were:

- finding time to learn;
- financial challenges;
- issues with childcare arrangements;
- the demands of combining learning with paid work; and
- the challenges posed by physical and mental health difficulties.

Age and life-stages were connected to an increased likelihood of facing practical barriers to continuation with a course:

*'But it's difficult when you're working, and if you've got a family. If you're doing it straight from college you're not going to have commitments. It's the commitments*

*you've got when you're older and it makes it more difficult.'* (Level 4, female, not working)

This results in decreased flexibility around the timing of learning, decreased time to undertake a course and associated independent study, and increased need to access consistent and high-quality support.

While learners had typically already made practical arrangements that enabled them to undertake a course, even relatively minor changes in circumstances would likely force adults to reappraise the feasibility of learning for them. For instance, changes in course times would make continuing on the course impossible for many:

*'They changed the times and they didn't tell us in the first year they were going to change the times. So, it's been a challenge to get there on time because I finish [work] at a certain hour.'* (Level 3, female, administrator)

Adults with children, and with physical or mental health difficulties, were particularly vulnerable to changes in financial, emotional, or workplace infrastructure. Many participants with families recognised that without childcare provision they would not be able to continue with their course. Breakfast and after-school clubs, and on-site crèches, are highly valued by learners with children. Partners, friends, and peers provided much needed childcare to enable learning to be maintained. Again, any shift in the available offer (whether of formal or informal provision) could have significant consequences for an adult's ability to maintain learning. Adults therefore need consistency from course providers, and from their personal networks, to enable them to plan for the practicalities of learning.

Courses with placements pose practical challenges to participants because a placement often disrupts a learner's established learning itinerary. Placements can involve a change in contact hours and in the location of learning, both of which need to be managed, particularly for those with children. Having placements during school holidays could present issues for learners with children, particularly when these had not been planned for in advance. Finding appropriate placements therefore contributed to experiences of stress during learning:

*'It shouldn't become a stress factor of the course, trying to find a placement. It had a very big impact on the learning side of things.'* (Level 5, female, carer)

Having access to convenient and affordable travel is crucial for maintaining attendance, both to course providers and placements. Free shuttle buses and sufficient parking spaces are examples of important infrastructure for maintaining learning.

These physical capability factors can culminate in learners feeling exhausted and overwhelmed by the combination of study and paid work, health conditions, and/or caring



responsibilities, particularly where courses run for years. Troublesome travel arrangements could exhaust learners and tip them away from learning and cause them to withdraw from their course.

## Physical Capability: flexibility

Flexible employers are key to enabling on-going engagement with courses and flexibility of provision (including part-time, evenings, and weekend classes) is crucial so participants can work while they learn. Having flexibility and being aware of the flexibility are crucial. One participant referred to other learners on her course who had withdrawn from their learning early after missing deadlines because they did not know they could negotiate them:

*'I've seen people drop out [of] courses where a deadline has come in for a submission of something and they've failed to submit and have just disengaged from the course. They haven't understood that they could ask for extenuating circumstances, or that they could be negotiable.'* (Level 4, female, manager in criminal justice health services)

Some adults described online infrastructure as important facilitators of continued engagement with a course. This included being able to access resources online at any time of day, meaning they could plan study and revision around other commitments:

*'The online portal has been excellent. [I have] been able to go on and re-look at slides and notes in my own time.'* (Level 4, female, not working)

*'Anything you don't understand you can simply Google it and go on to YouTube and get that extra support from YouTube...resource-wise, the teacher can put you on to additional resources.'* (Level 3, male, works in security)

This flexibility is important for adults balancing competing time demands, meaning they can catch up at their convenience.

## Learning providers and quality

Adults require reliable and trustworthy sources of information about learning. Without these, some participants found themselves enrolled on unaccredited, or unfunded, courses. Some participants commented on the need for quality monitoring and auditing of courses and tutors to ensure courses were good enough:

*'They could really do with someone coming in almost like a spot check and just asking us a few questions and I think they'd learn a lot from doing something like*

*that...Or asking people halfway through the course, you know, do you think there's anything that could be improved on?' (Level 2, female, freelance IT teacher)*

*'It's not clear, even when you go online, who does what and who is legal and who is not legal.'* (Level 5, female, carer)

It was not unusual for adults involved in this study to give examples of poor quality course provision, including poorly-organised classes, misinformation from providers about the course, and a lack of support and supervision in large classes:

*'It's very cramped when you've only got one tutor and then this volunteer. They're not really providing enough...They seem to have skimped...because the volunteer, he's a barber who's done courses, because he's volunteering, he doesn't have to turn up. When he doesn't appear at 5:30 I start thinking, 'Oh no'.'* (Level 2, female, freelance IT teacher)

These experiences had the potential to disrupt the determination to learn, reopening the question of whether learning was, on balance, worthwhile and causing adults to re-evaluate their continued participation.

## Psychological capability

Other factors that influence adults in their efforts to maintain learning are those connected to an individual's perception of their capability for learning. While many participants recognised that going back into education would be challenging, they still felt unprepared for the *'uphill battle'* associated with educational tasks, such as academic essay writing, and referencing:

*'It definitely feels harder when you're not straight from school as you struggle to remember things... it's a bit like starting again. But it's easier in some ways because you know why you're there.'* (Level 3, female, works in hospitality/bar staff)

Some capability issues are heightened for adults returning to learning after a long break, who fear they will not be able to reach the required academic level:

*'I was alright back then but now I'm terrified, I've got to do one [an essay] for the OU [Open University] and I'm terrified.'* (Level 5, female, training instructor)

Participants' capacity to overcome difficulties and to perceive themselves as a successful learner depends on a range of factors, including previous experiences of education; social and support networks; and reference points for successful adult learning. Some participants had previous positive experiences of education which sustained them through difficulties on their course and shaped their self-perceptions as capable learners.

For some participants, initial fear about their capability for learning was dampened by their early experiences of a course. Success during initial assessments and an experience of settling into a course could both create greater positivity towards learning, and an identity as a learner capable of achieving the qualification:

*'Once I'd got past the first one, I really started to enjoy it, and I got a good sense of achievement from it.'* (Level 3, female, administrator in medical sector)

The confidence created by successful learning creates positive cycles of engagement, maintaining learners through future *'tough spots.'* Experiencing a sense of achievement or early success on a course increases commitment and motivation. However, where success is lacking, fear of failure and lack of progression can damage an adult's confidence and put them at risk of withdrawing from their learning.

Awareness of available support, and having the confidence to seek this out, are integral to adults' perception of themselves as capable learners. Support comes in many forms, including: tutor support; the support of peers; the support of family; pastoral support from providers; and support from employers:

*'I might tend to go to other people instead, I might tend to ask family, I would always get them to read over my coursework and things rather than give it to a lecturer...because I don't want to give it to them cos I don't know what they're going to say.'* (Level 5, female, carer)

For some this support has a tangible impact on levels of engagement and achievement during a course:

*'I'm much happier at the university because I feel I'm supported there. And everything is online so you can go back and look at all the slides that they do. Whereas before, I didn't have that.'* (Level 4, female, not working)

Once in learning, fear of being too old does not necessarily disappear and some adults continue to battle with the feeling they don't belong. For some participants, a fear over a lack of capability was related to self-perception of being too old. Often, the fear was the product of social engagement and related to not feeling like a full member of the learning community:

*'You have to do a lot of work, as a mature student, to be part of the circle, to be part of the class.'* (Level 5, female, carer)

Participants also spoke of instances where younger learners had distracted them, or failed to input into group work, with a consequent detrimental impact on participants' abilities to complete their own work:

*'I think sometimes not being on the same wavelength with some of my colleagues, because they're younger and they haven't, basically, worked so they've just gone straight into education. I have all those different experiences, so sometimes it's just maturity levels, I think. Sometimes if you must do things in groups and they don't turn up, it affects what you're trying to achieve.'* (Level 2, female, administrator in financial services)

In contrast, other learners spoke of finding much less age-based differentiation between their fellow learners than they had anticipated and that they enjoyed mixing with people of different ages.

Some participants described feelings of pride at getting onto a course. This pride was a sustaining emotion, motivating them to continue through difficulties and to complete a qualification:

*'I would use myself as an example and I think it has helped me, I would say if I can go and sign-up for a college course and I've amazed myself that I've kept going, because...I'd give up normally. I've continued doing it and now I think I don't want to miss a session. I think it's like personal pride, you know, if I can continue the next thirteen weeks that's quite an achievement for me. I think if I can do it then anyone can do it.'* (Level 2, female, freelance IT teacher)

## **A focus on specific goals**

Some participants cited their age and life-experience as a reason for their improved ability to make decisions about the learning that would suit them. These learners were more likely to select courses they could sustain their engagement in. They had more realistic expectations of what their experience of learning on the course would be like. Through experience and a growth in self-awareness it was also easier to understand and evaluate the possible outcomes of learning. This sense of value could sustain them through difficulties.

If an adult's main motivation for taking up learning is to progress in their career, they are more likely to complete their learning as it is the qualification that will enable them to fulfil their goal. Where learners have clear expectations, and focus on the outcomes of learning, they are more likely to find solutions to the practical challenges they face:

*'I see it as important for my career, I'm much more willing, I'm much more motivated to do work because now I've found what I want to do whereas before it just seemed...like you have to go to university.'* (Level 5, female, carer)

*'I didn't want to spend the rest of my life in an admin role...jobs nowadays are much more dependent on the qualifications you have.'* (Level 5, female, training instructor)

In some cases, enjoying the content of the course motivated people to continue to engage in it:

*'[It is] wonderful to do it and see how you can change people's lives and really give people their lives back. And put the things you learn into practice too.'* (Level 3, male, delivery driver)

## Differences by level of learning

Due to the nature of the courses, Level 4 or 5 learners tended to have more specific goals and expectations. Despite enthusiasm and clear goals, Level 2 or 3 learners were more likely to feel exhausted by the contemplation of how many years of education it would take to succeed in their chosen career. Level 2 and 3 learners tend to have less specific outcomes in mind for their learning. There was a greater tendency for adults engaged in Levels 2 and 3 learning to drop out of their course due to a feeling that the course was wrong for them. This reaffirms the importance of providers offering taster days and Information, Advice, and Guidance ahead of people enrolling on courses. A lack of confidence over capability for learning, alongside fear at being too old, were significant and repeated barriers to maintaining and completing learning at all levels.

## Summary

The balance between personal benefits and personal costs continue to be evaluated beyond enrolment. Participant accounts suggest several ways learners are influenced when seeking to maintain and complete their learning.

Findings from the maintenance stage reiterate those of other stages of learning that describe the importance of adults having firm practical arrangements in place before learning can happen, including childcare, transport, finances, and flexible working. It also highlights the importance of providers offering services where learners can go for advice if one of these factors changes to ensure learning stays on track.

Mental health difficulties, pastoral needs and learning difficulties are significant and repeated barriers to maintaining and completing. Adults need supportive learning contexts (including supportive tutors, peers and employers) to maintain their commitment to education. Providing and raising awareness of student support services are often crucial interventions made by learning providers.

Supportive learning contexts are vital for maintaining learning as is an adult's ability to continue to see the value of learning and its role in helping them to achieve goals and aspirations. For each learner, seeing the value of learning and being able to connect their learning efforts with positive future outcomes are important in maintaining motivation and interest across a course, and hence in making completion more likely. This suggests the importance of investment in high-quality, accessible Information, Advice, and Guidance in learning institutions, and in ensuring that adult learners are aware of it. It may also be useful to have sessions dedicated to career planning built into the structure of a course.

Participants' accounts of the maintenance stage also suggest an important role for government in developing tools that empower adults to assess the quality of courses and providers. Participants express the desire for these tools to be trustworthy and centrally-managed, so they are aware of the quality and nature of the course before they commit to it. Where adults felt that courses were unsuitable or of poor quality, they were more likely to withdraw from their learning before they completed.

## 8. Engaging more adults in learning

Interviews with learners revealed a wide range of factors that influence adults' decisions to take up learning and the information that they need at different stages of the decision-making process. Two focus groups with adults who were not currently engaged in learning were undertaken towards the end of the study in London and Leeds, these provided the opportunity to test the most effective ways of presenting information about learning opportunities to adults. A mock prospectus was provided to participants as a stimulus for discussion, see Appendix. This chapter presents participant views on the stimulus including:

- the appearance of the materials;
- how the benefits of learning are communicated;
- learner voice and testimony;
- learning formats;
- work placements;
- financing learning; and
- student support services.

### Making materials attractive

Participants agreed that images are very important in any marketing material for learning, particularly for those adults who are more tentative about taking up learning. Images should show the breadth of learning on offer and that learning is fun:

*'Something creative maybe – adults doing a pottery class, something fun with smiles on their faces...learning is just as fun when you're an adult as when you're younger. You want to go in there going 'I'm going to come out looking like that'.'*  
(Non-learner, female, Leeds)

Adults also want to see the diversity of people in learning, including all ages, ethnicities, cultures and disability.

*'It's different mixes of people, all walks of life, all ages, sat around the table, smiling, learning from each other.'* (Non-learner, female, Leeds)

*'I'm 20, and I look at that, and I think I'm not represented there at all. So, I'd say I would have liked at least maybe one young person in there, just to show [a spectrum of age].'* (Non-learner, female, London)

*'For adult learners with disabilities, I imagine it would be quite difficult, so potentially if your college did offer...accessible learning, then advertise that as well.'* (Non-learner, female, London)

## Communicating the benefits of learning

The mock prospectus included example statistics on the outcomes of learning. Overall, participants were positive about including data on the benefits of learning and thought that facts were an effective way of engaging adults. Statistics should include data on career-related outcomes, such as job promotions and wage progression, as well as wider benefits such as self-confidence and health. This will ensure that the messages tap into the different motivations that adults have. Making information on outcomes available will also help adults weigh up the costs and benefits of learning.

*'The factual layout struck a chord, putting it in a factual way... you want to know the actual [numbers]...it shows that the course actually is beneficial and not a waste of time.'* (Non-learner, female, London)

*'If you can show me that I can financially benefit from it, then I'll be happy to invest. If you can tell me that my salary's going to go up about £5K in a year, and I must pay £1,000 for a course, then that sounds like a good deal to me. Then I know that I can maybe put some of my private life on the back burner for 6 months or whatever, because I know that the result is going to be beneficial in the long run.'* (Non-learner, male, London)

*'I think the confidence one probably links in with exhaustion... if you feel more confident, and you're happier in yourself, ...there's reward. If you're tired, but you're loving what you're doing – it's like going that extra mile...you're exhausted but there's an achievement at the end of it.'* (Non-learner, male, Leeds)

However, feedback from participants in both focus groups reflected that they were cautious about the accuracy of data on the outcomes of courses. Adults would need to know that the data was current, local, and specific to a course and/or institution.

*'I think as nice as the figures are...almost every statement here could be very much misleading. Like you've touched on the salary of £25K. Okay, that might be your top bracket...but how many of them know that they're going to be put on the start on £15K, rather than £25K?'* (Non-learner, male, London)

*'I think it's very vague. I want to know whether this is nationally or in a specific area. My partner's got a Level 3 Cooking [qualification], he's a chef, but he lived in Liverpool and he's moved onto London. And there aren't 500 chef jobs in either of those... it's false promises.'* (Non-learner, female, Leeds)



Information about the outcomes or benefits of learning was something that participants thought adults would respond well to in the early stages of decision-making (at pre-contemplation or contemplation), as they would grab attention. They did not think that outcome data would influence an individual's decision once they had decided to take up learning.

## Learner voice

The visibility of learners – and of diverse learners that adults could identify with – was important to participants. Learner testimonials were useful, so long as they were authentic and told the learner's full story, rather than only the positive aspects of their experience. Learners' stories should include information about their barriers to learning, challenges they have experienced while on their course, and practical information about how they have overcome these issues.

*'You've got to trust that these are real people, and their statements are not being made up by somebody in a Marketing department – you read it and think yeah, it's good, it's positive, it's the back story that we don't see.'* (Non-learner, male, Leeds)

*'I would want to know how they got support. Say, a stay at home mum...what services she could use. How they helped her, how the course helped her, what she did and how she found going on it? I don't need ten people to tell me, just one or two, to kind of break down their actual experience.'* (Non-learner, female, Leeds)

Participants suggested that learner testimonials could be communicated in a range of ways, including films, podcasts and during open days.

*'You could maybe have a link to a YouTube or podcast...where you've got an individual sat there and sort of talk about, you know, I had these worries about cost and time, and this is how the college helped me. They have set up a payment plan with interest free. With the kids, I could get them to school and go and do two hours. That kind of thing – you can sit there and relate to it.'* (Non-learner, male, London)

## Format of learning

Participants responded very positively to information about the different ways in which learning could be made available to them. The benefits of online learning identified included flexibilities around time of day and place, and people being able to learn at their own pace. In this way online learning was perceived as a way of overcoming some of the barriers to learning because it could fit around childcare responsibilities and be accessed

flexibly, for instance whilst commuting. Online learning was perceived to be a beneficial option for people who are self-motivated and for people who may be anxious about attending face-to-face learning. Some learners described positive experiences of engaging in online discussions, and of using peer discussion forums to support one another to complete work. It was assumed that online learning would be cheaper than face-to-face and so expected that price differences would be reflected across the different options.

*'Doing it in your own time, if you've got a spare hour here or over there, and you can go on as much as you can, then pick up where you left off whenever you get the chance. Because it can be hard when you're having to go in and you have responsibilities.'* (Non-learner, female, Leeds)

*'It's got to be cheaper to sit at your computer at home – there's no travelling costs, there's no building hire. So that should bring the costs down.'* (Non-learner, male, Leeds)

The social aspects of learning were also important to learners including opportunities to learn from their peers and to seek quick, responsive feedback from tutors. For this reason, blended options, which provide opportunities for face to face and online learning, were preferred by both groups:

*'I think time...would be the easiest to overcome, with online. I do quite like a bit of interaction. A mixture of the two would probably [work best]. If you had to go in once a month but worked independently for the rest of the time.'* (Non-learner, female, Leeds).

Some participants explained that the face to face element of the course would ensure that they stayed motivated and on track with the course content, while combining this with the online element would give them flexibility around other commitments.

*'I'd be maybe a little bit isolated doing it online. And if I did it in my own time, I just wouldn't get it done. I'd want to be there, surrounded by other people, a lecturer talking to me and I could go over and speak to him.'* (Non-learner, female, Leeds)

*'I like the idea of dual, where you can do both. Because if you weren't attending the classes, you could make it up in your own time. I think that's brilliant. I think that's the best page so far.'* (Non-learner, male, London)

'Some participants were particularly keen to emphasise the value placed on the social aspect of learning and their concern that learning online only could lead to greater isolation for some adults:

*'The world that we're in right now, there are so many people with mental health issues, that really, getting out is the thing to do. Rather than all of us shut away looking at a computer...blended learning's kind of forcing your hand – that you must go out. Yes, you can do as much independent learning as you want, however, we really should be encouraged to meet people.'* (Non-learner, female, Leeds)

AI chatbots were off-putting to many participants because they thought they might not work or be responsive enough to learners' queries:

*'What if it doesn't work? Like you just can't get it to work, or there's a problem with it.'* (Non-learner, female, Leeds)

*'I'm not sure how comfortable with the AI robot, the chat bot, because if you've got a question that's not put in the framework of how that robot is to respond, then [it wouldn't work well].'* (Non-learner, male, London)

## Work placements

Participants across both groups recognised the potential benefits of a work placement, such as gaining first-hand experience of a workplace, putting theory into practice, and gaining exposure to an employer.

*'If you don't have that placement element to it, you've just got this notion in your mind of oh, this is what it might be like. But then you go and you realise well actually this might not be for me. With a placement you can see both sides of it.'* (Non-learner, female, Leeds)

*'You're getting the hands-on experience. I think it's all well and good being taught about doing your research and stuff, but until you've put what you've learnt into practice – getting a job always goes on experience. And you're getting your foot in the door with certain places.'* (Non-learner, female, Leeds)

However, participants also identified potential challenges with completing a work placement, if adults must balance this with an existing job and other commitments. It was therefore suggested that this be an option open to adults, rather than a prerequisite for courses.

*'That wouldn't be fair if someone was doing a night course and then couldn't go on that work placement because they'd potentially have to take time off work. So, I would suggest it would be a flexible option that if you have the time to go do a work placement, maybe take a day's annual leave or whatever if you want to do*

*that, but to make it mandatory would then bar a lot of people, because people can't get time off work.'* (Non-learner, male, London)

## Financing learning

Information about the financial implications of learning, and financial support that learners can access, received a mixed reaction from participants. While they agreed that this information needed to be available for prospective learners, some thought it could be off-putting and the information provided in the mock prospectus about financial support was not sufficiently reassuring to mitigate this.

*'I think it's off putting. If the main thrust is to get adults back into learning, and improving their career prospects and their wages, it's just too much of a hit, I think, on that page – it's not positive, like the pictures were, and the back stories. This is cold, hard truth. And you look at it and think oh, hang on.'* (Non-learner, male, Leeds)

Participants found the supplied information about Advanced Learner Loans confusing as they did not understand which level qualification levels they applied to, who could access them and how.

*'I think it will cause confusion because it says that loans are available for all course fees for Level 3, so there's no loan available for Level 1, or Level 2, only if you get to Level 3, and then if you get to Level 3, we'll drop it for Level 4.'* (Non-learner, male, London)

Information about loans and other financial information needs to be clearly communicated, with levels clearly explained and signposting to sources of further information and advice.

Participants highlighted the importance of some learning options being funded, as the financial burden of learning was the central barrier many of them faced. One suggestion from participants was that more courses could offer an upfront fee, which learners are able to have reimbursed if they attend and complete the full course. They felt that this would incentivise people to carefully think about learning options before taking them up, and to be committed to completing them.

## Student support services

The mock prospectus included information about a range of services that might be available to adult learners, such as help with managing money and finding childcare. Overall, participants agreed that potential learners would need a full breakdown of all the

support services available to them. They also wanted to know how the services could be accessed and specific details about the support they could expect to receive.

*'They are really beneficial and that you would want to offer. But how exactly are you going to do these things?'* (Non-learner, female, Leeds)

*'I'd like perhaps a link to say these are all the services, and then being able to click on a certain section, all the details [are there], counselling, health, sexual health, money troubles.'* (Non-learner, female, Leeds)

Some of the information, for example support from financial advisors, was potentially condescending to adults. Some participants would want help to access loans or financial support but not help with their budgeting skills.

*'At first you think oh that's good, but when you read it, it says financial advisers are going to tell you how to manage your money.'* (Non-learner, male, Leeds)

Participants suggested that there be support available for people with mental health problems and pastoral care for people who are finding it challenging to sustain their learning.

*'At work we have a care team, that are all employees and you can contact the care team if you've any worries at all, from financial, family issue, work issues, anything at all, you can contact in confidence, and speak to a care team member.'* (Non-learner, female, Leeds)

## Summary

The focus groups suggested several key points about adult learning offers and how these are marketed:

- Images are very important in marketing materials for learning. These should show the breadth of learning, present a diversity of learners and depict learning as fun.
- The benefits of learning should be communicated including career-related outcomes and wider benefits such as improved self-confidence.
- Learner testimonies should be used, but these need to be authentic and discuss barriers to learning and how these have been overcome, as well as the benefits.
- Varied learning formats are required to fit different personal requirements and circumstances. For most adults, blended learning is preferable to online-only learning as a way of combining flexibility with the social benefits of learning.
- Work placements are a beneficial way of providing first-hand experience of a workplace, however adults recognise the challenges of work placements for those with an existing job and other commitments.

- Information about the financial implications of learning, and the availability of loans and bursaries, needs to be clearly communicated and free from jargon.
- Information providing a full break-down of the student support services available, how these are accessed and the nature of the support available.

This stage reaffirms the argument that adults need to access different types of information at different stages of the decision-making process. Statistics on the potential benefits or outcomes of learning could be useful for adults in the pre-contemplation and contemplation stages, to encourage them to consider learning to achieve their goals. Learner testimonials and information that provides detail on the practicalities of engaging with learning as an adult may be most appropriate for adults at the contemplation and determination stages. While participants agreed that potential learners require information about the financial implications of learning, they argued this could be off-putting to adults who were only tentatively considering learning and so detailed information about specific courses may be most effective at the determination stage, similar to the previous two stages.

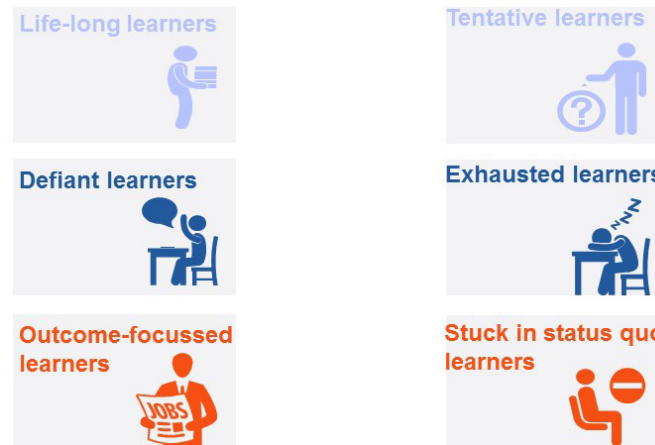
The group discussions also highlighted the need for breadth and flexibility to ensure that all adults feel that learning could be relevant to and possible for them. This requires flexibility in the way that learning opportunities are marketed, different formats of teaching and learning, and a range of services to support adults as they access and undertake learning. Finally, participants discussed several locations where they felt information about learning could be usefully communicated. These were:

- Online (websites, social media and forums)
- Tube/train/bus stations
- Library
- Pubs
- Schools and children's centres
- Job centres
- Council buildings
- GP surgeries
- Supermarkets
- Through the post

## 9. Types of learners

An attitudinal typology emerged from the interviews with learners, and based on the range of factors influencing engagement with learning discussed throughout the report, see Figure 9. Our participants' attitudes to the purpose of learning was essential for determining whether, when and how individuals engaged with learning. While all factors were influential (whether positively or negatively), without a sense of the purpose of learning, individuals were less likely to engage with learning.

**Figure 9 Six types of learners based on their purpose for learning**



Membership in any typology group is not fixed, nor are the groups mutually exclusive. An individual may move between groups across their life, as their purpose for learning evolves and the factors influencing their engagement with learning change. An individual may demonstrate features of other groups, but it is the most prominent reasons for learning and the influence of key factors on them at any given point that places them in a typology group. Further defining these groups by the demographic characteristics of the participants involved in this study would risk misrepresentation. Participants were purposively sampled by the criteria outlined in the introduction chapter rather than as representative of the learner population.

Next, we discuss each learner type in more detail, and share a journey map of real participants to illustrate each type. The maps illustrate the most influential factors for learners at each stage of the decision-making journey, and highlights potential intervention opportunities. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of participants.

See Appendix H for initial suggestions for statements, the responses to which (on an agreement scale) would indicate to what extent any given learner might be allocated to any given typology group.

## Life-long learner

Life-long learners view learning as a constant part of life, speaking positively about learning regardless of age. These learners are the champions for adult learning. They regularly engage with formal and informal learning, and decide to learn and enrol with relative ease.

Social drivers are a strong, enabling factor of influence for these learners, specifically having a role model to demonstrate the acceptability and feasibility of adult learning. An equally powerful facilitator is previous positive experience of learning. Psychological capability, the confidence in their cognitive ability to learn, also had the strongest influence on these learners.

### Life-long learner: example journey

Jane, 57, manages a criminal justice health service in London and lives with her husband, just outside the city. Her five children are now independent and engaged in their own learning journeys. Jane has been learning throughout her life, taking advantage of local courses that fit around familial and work commitments. Following her interests and passions, Jane has used the qualifications she has gained to enter new sectors and progress within roles. She is currently undertaking a project as part of a research fellowship.

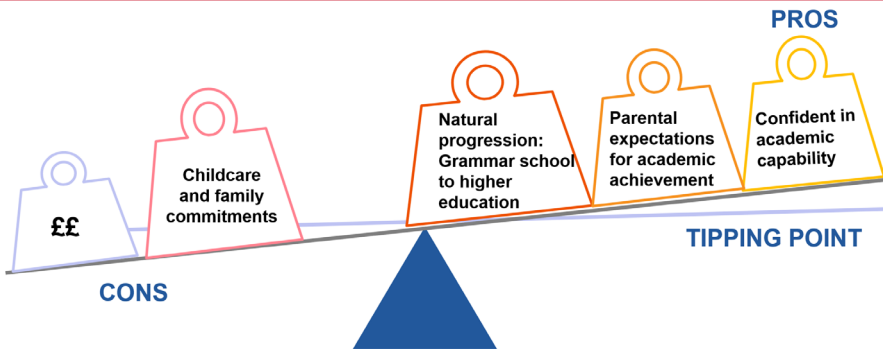
See overleaf for a summary of Jane's journey.



## Factors of influence

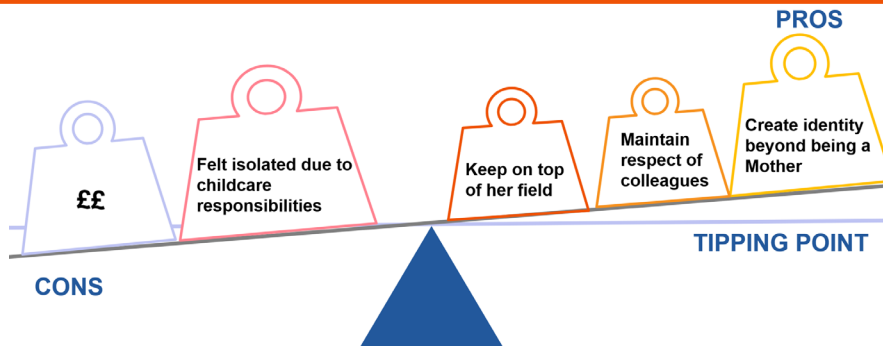
## Interventions

### Pre-contemplation



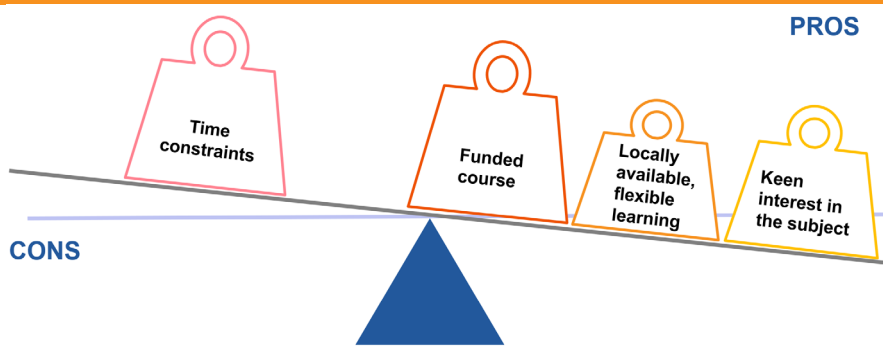
= communications and marketing materials, such as brochures, or leaflets, detailing the availability of short, freely available, local courses

### Contemplation



= targeted advertising of sector specific training and learning opportunities delivered through existing professional networks

### Determination & enrolment

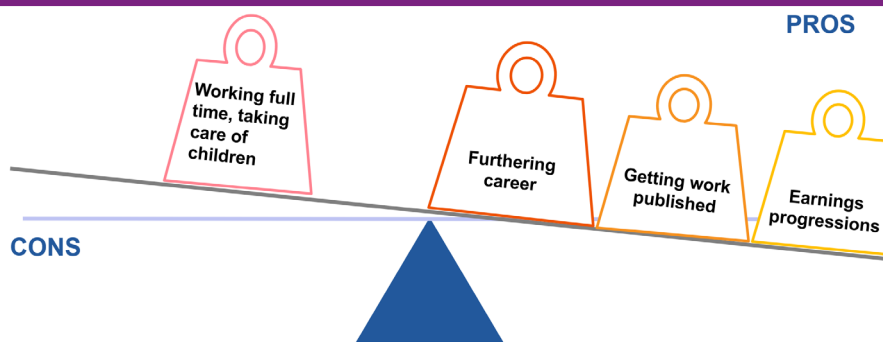


= greater availability of free or greatly reduced cost courses

= ensuring courses are available that are part time, flexible and have provision of free child care facilities.

= provide free 'taster' courses that enable learners to try a new subject they have an interest in, at a low risk.

### Completion



= promote and foster partnership networks between institutes of higher/further education and third sector organisations.

= increase the number of available scholarships/bursaries available for sector experts to research substantive issues

## **Defiant learner**

Defiant learners view learning as a necessary requirement, speaking about the need to prove to themselves, and others, that they can learn. These learners 'learn against the odds' or despite significant barriers because they have a strong understanding of the value of learning for them.

Psychological capability was the most influential factor for defiant learners. Unlike life-long learners, this factor displayed more as willpower rather than confidence in their cognitive ability.

### **Defiant learner: Example journey**

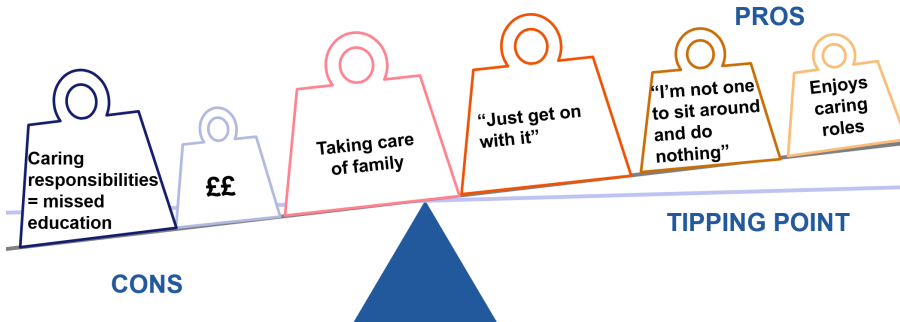
Sarah is in her 30s and lives with her husband and two children in Birmingham. She left school at 14 to take on significant caring responsibilities within her family. Having missed out on a lot of her primary education, she is now undertaking a Level 3 course, with the hope of becoming a specialist support teacher. In addition to her learning, Sarah cares for her husband, who has a long term chronic illness, and their two children throughout the week. She worries about financial stability, and shared with us her experience of receiving jobseekers allowance sanctions. She volunteers as a Beaver Scout leader in her spare time.

See overleaf for a summary of Sarah's journey.

## Factors of influence

## Interventions

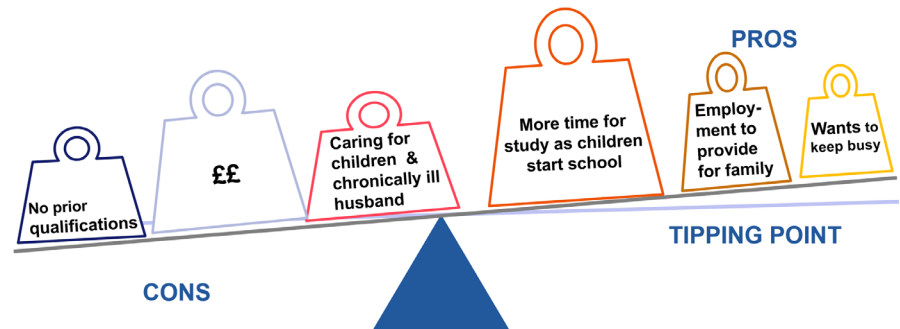
### Pre-contemplation



= communications to raise awareness of the availability of validated, accredited online courses.

= messaging focused on practical applications and outcomes of courses

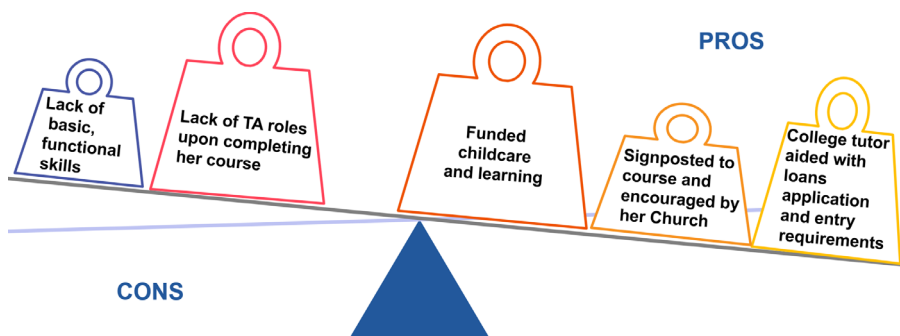
### Contemplation



= high quality, person-centred, IAG provision at frontline of learning institutions to match learner aims to courses and address adult specific issues

= targeted advertising and communications of locally available courses to parents of children who are starting school.

### Determination & enrolment

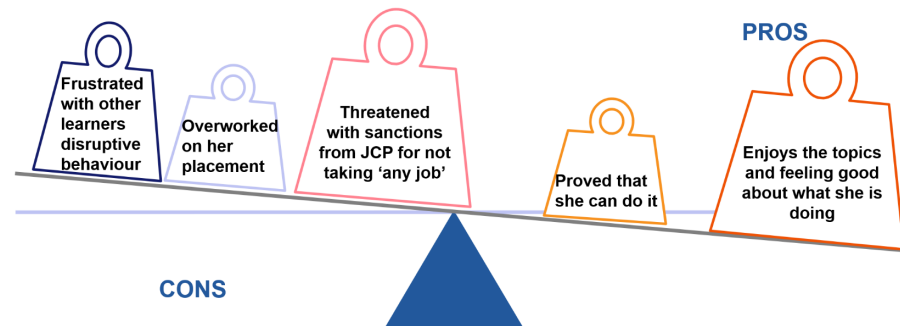


= utilise existing informal and formal social networks to raise awareness of local learning opportunities.

= raise awareness of the availability of funding streams and financial support, such as Advanced Learner Loans.

= ensure 'continuity of care' from course enrolment through to completion

### Completion



= ensure that placements are quality assured, with tangible benefits for learners

= provide job brokerage services, to ensure that the flexibility needed for learning is matched with equal flexibility in the labour market

## **Outcome-focussed learner**

Outcome-focussed learners view learning as a way to achieve a clear set of outcomes and expectations. They speak about tangible personal and professional outcomes, and actively look for opportunities (learning or otherwise) to achieve their aims.

Reflective factors, such as weighing up the costs and benefits of engaging in a learning opportunity were the most influential for this group. They identified the personal or professional value, and compared that to the possible challenges of engaging with learning. Psychological and social drivers were also influential, especially for those learners focussed on therapeutic, emotional and wellbeing personal outcomes.

### **Outcome-focussed learner: Example journey**

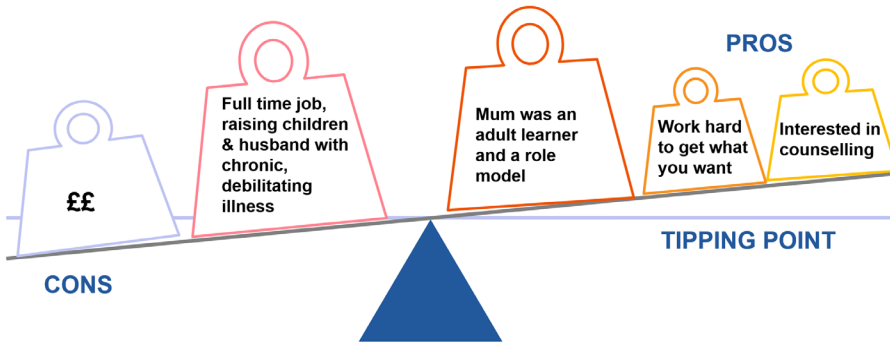
Peta is in her late fifties, lives with her husband in South East England and enjoys spending time with her grandchildren, and designing her next tattoo. She became a teaching assistant after leaving school, and over the years has completed a couple of level 2 and 3 access courses in counselling and adult mental health. She is currently off work due to chronic physical and mental health issues, and is working on a level 3 course in adult safeguarding.

See overleaf for a summary of Peta's journey.

**Factors of influence**

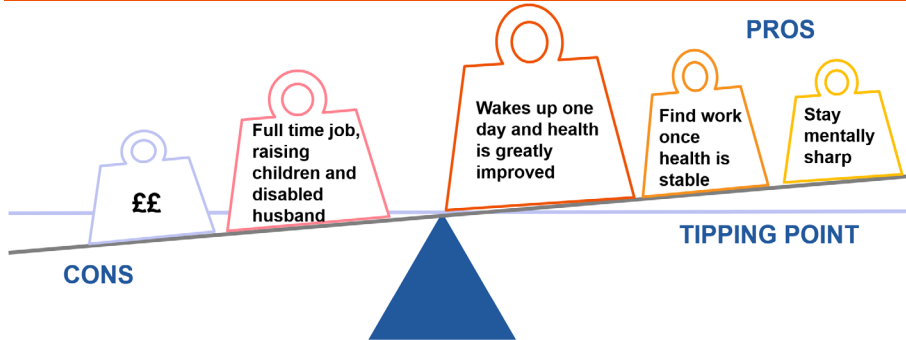
**Interventions**

**Pre-contemplation**



= messages normalising adult learning and communicating the value of learning as an adult

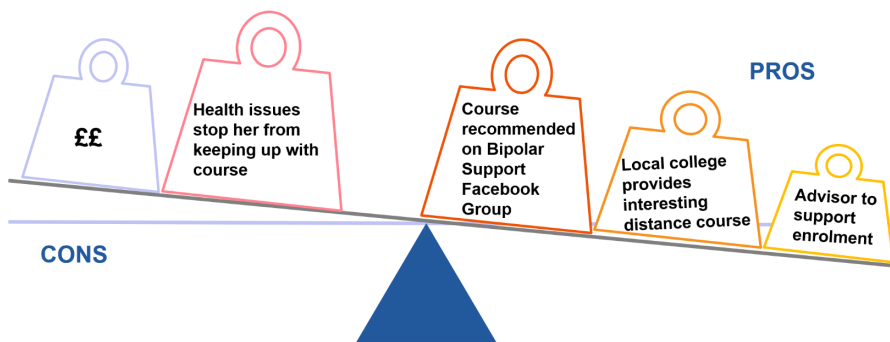
**Contemplation**



= advertising value of learning for personal betterment, and local provision, through a wide range of channels

= greater provision of free or reduced cost courses

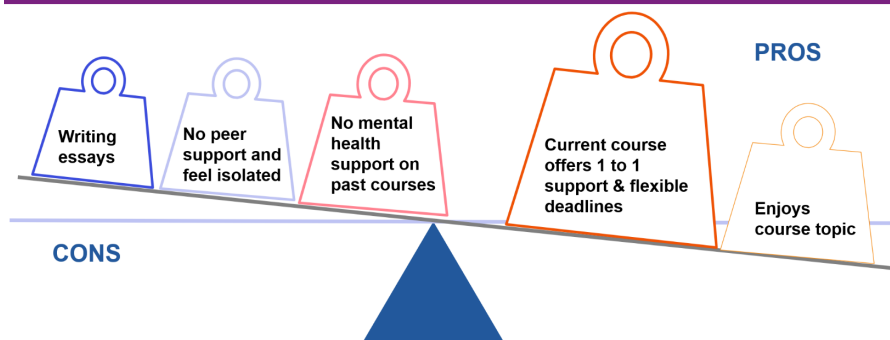
**Determination & enrolment**



= providers to have option to post or email enrolment materials and course info for those unable to visit the campus

= student services to offer wider remit, including financial support

**Completion**



= holistic pastoral support essential for enabling learners with mental and physical health issues to learn  
 = tutor support to go beyond course content  
 = more flexible provision, allowing flexible deadlines  
 = create a sense of community on non-classroom based courses to increase social interaction

## **Tentative learner**

Learning outcomes are viewed by tentative learners as unclear or unlikely, and these learners often exhibit apprehensive or ambivalent views on the purpose of learning. They speak about how precarious learning is, or that it is not the right time for them to be learning because personal responsibilities are prioritised. Tentative learners slowly and sometimes erratically consider learning opportunities.

Like outcome-focussed learners, tentative learners are most influenced by weighing up the costs and benefits of engaging in learning. In their case, they focus on the costs which outweigh the benefits. Difficult experiences of learning and perceptions of an adult learner needing to be 'very clever', reinforced the views that learning was not worth the potential benefits.

## **Tentative learner: Example journey**

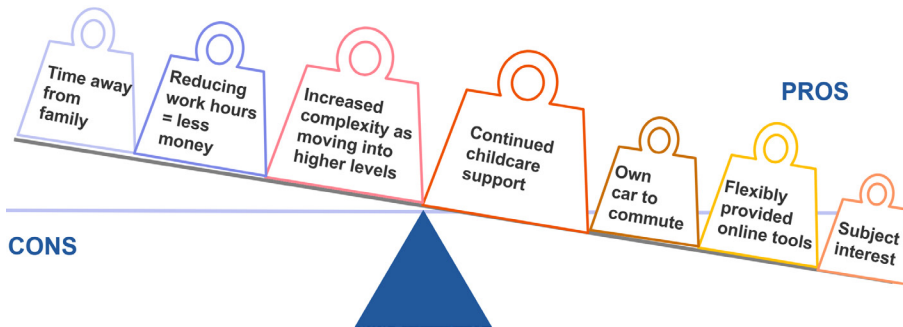
Sarah is in her twenties and lives with her husband and two young children. She is currently not working due to physical and mental health conditions. She is currently enrolled in a Level 2 floristry course out of interest and an opportunity to get out of her house as she is otherwise isolated. She enjoys the subject but her physical health is getting progressively worse. This influences her mental health, and she currently feels disengaged with her course.

See overleaf for a summary of Sarah's journey.

**Factors of influence**

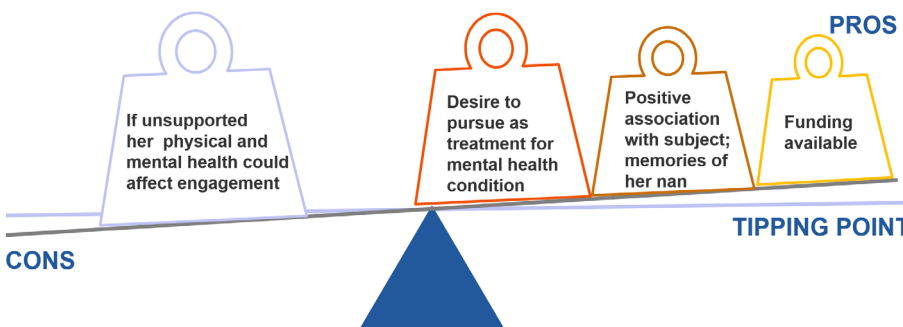
**Interventions**

**Pre-contemplation**



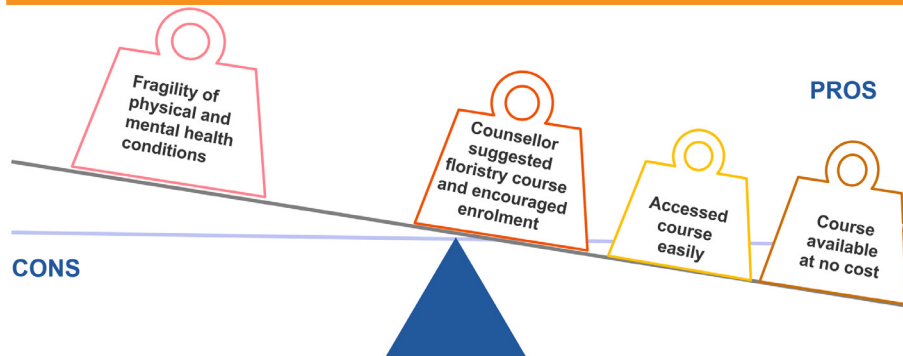
= messages that normalise diversity of ages and abilities  
 = messages about pursuing interests

**Contemplation**



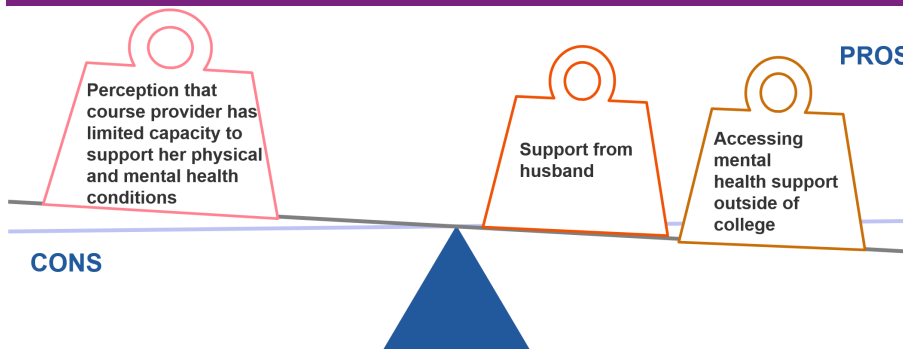
= advertising value of education as an investment in oneself

**Determination & enrolment**



= student support services for people of varying abilities

**Completion**



= increase awareness among staff about signs of mental health issues and how to support students

= offer of pastoral support for mental and physical health conditions

## Exhausted learner

Exhausted learners view learning as a burden. There are two types – the realisers, who realise what is involved in engaging with learning after they've learned, and the intensives, those in nearly continual or intensive learning, including those completing PhDs. Exhausted learners often speak about not realising the demands of learning when they enrolled, and described 'just getting through' learning. Exhausted learners may withdraw, take large breaks between learning or consider smaller, bite size courses.

These learners were most influenced by their environment. They felt particularly burdened by a lack of services they needed to engage with learning, such as childcare and affordable transport. For those working, employers were unsupportive by not providing flexible study leave or contributing to learning costs. Exhausted learners were more likely than the other types to feel constrained by what they saw as a lack of flexible provision; courses that did not work around their life.

### Exhausted learner: Example journey

Jade is in her thirties and lives in Essex with her husband and daughter. She works for the NHS as a support worker in the Dementia Team. After her daughter was born, Jade started focusing on taking training opportunities to progress in work. She is currently undertaking an Associate Practitioner course while working full time and is finding it difficult to keep up with the changing world of education, while balancing commitments in her personal and work life.

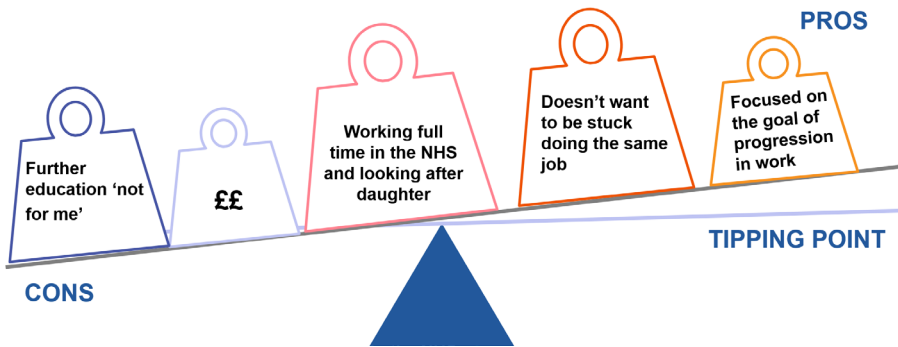
See overleaf for a summary of Jade's journey.



## Factors of influence

## Interventions

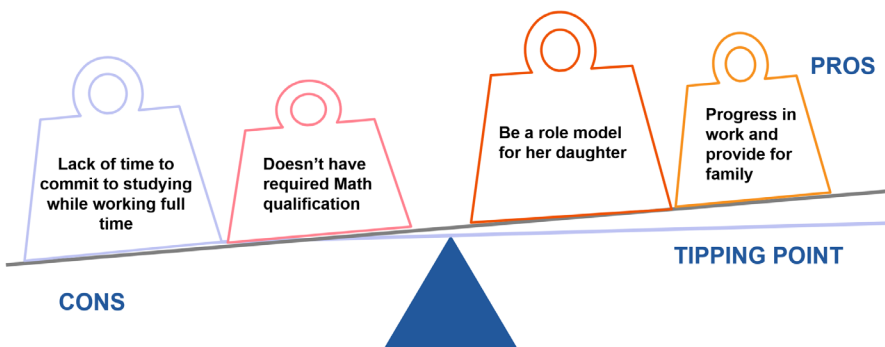
### Pre-contemplation



= outcomes focused communications demonstrating the practical value of learning.

= case studies or testimonials detailing success stories that 'people like me' have had through learning.

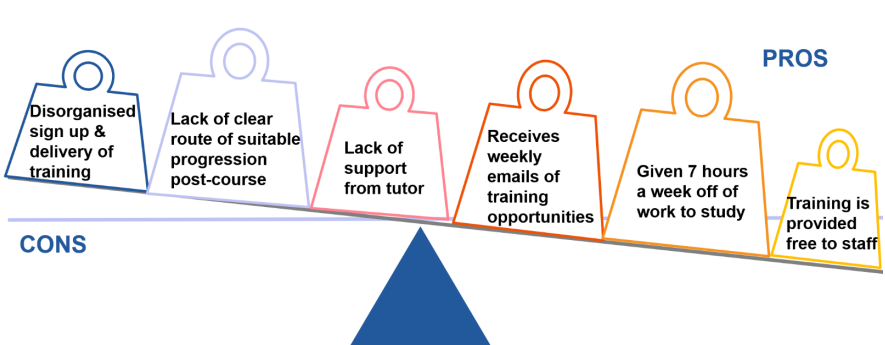
### Contemplation



= raise awareness of the right to take time off of work to train.

= provide information regarding freely available functional skills classes that are available. Ensure that people know there is tuition and help available if they think they don't have the required prerequisites.

### Determination & enrolment

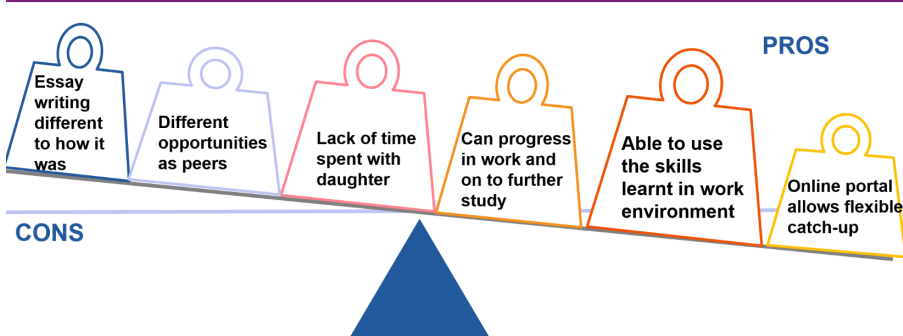


= greater amount of involvement and support from personal tutor.

= effective co-ordination and organisation between the employer and learning provider.

= ensure that full time staff undertaking part time education are given the same opportunities to shadow colleagues and learn.

### Completion



= provide on-going support and tutorage for essay writing and referencing.

= allow flexible starts at work or university to allow for commitments that working parents have.

= greater number of parking spaces at local university.

## **Stuck in the status quo learner**

Stuck in the status quo learners did not see learning as a feasible option for them, given their personal circumstances. They speak about having a lot on their plate and being resigned to their circumstances. These learners were 'stuck' at a stage in their life and required a disruption to get them into learning, either to them directly or from recognising others around them are changing.

These learners were most influenced by their social networks. Friends, family and colleagues reinforced messages that they did not need to learn because participants were in a secure job or had too much going on in their life to take up learning. Social networks also had a facilitating influence; participants saw others in their life going through change and it triggered thoughts of personal change.

### **Stuck in the status quo learner: Example journey**

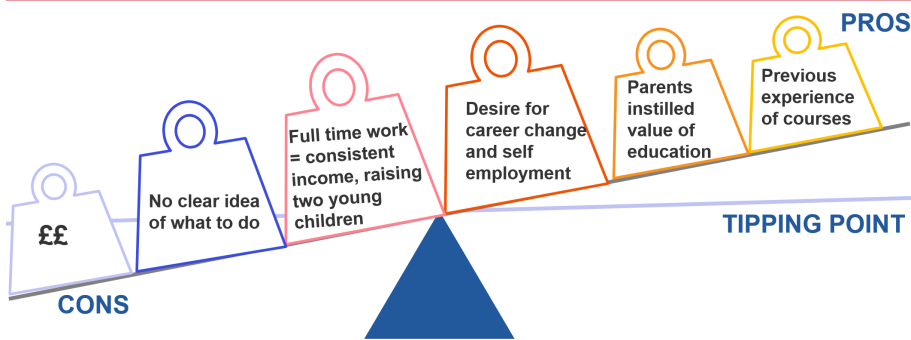
Aman is in his fifties and lives with his wife and children in North East England. He has worked in security for about 20 years, with a short period of a few years working in Home Health Care. He is mostly concerned with providing for his family and working towards having independence through self-employment. He is currently in Level 3 of a plumbing course and continues to work full time in security however he is at risk of redundancy.

See overleaf for a summary of Aman's journey.

## Factors of influence

## Interventions

### Pre-contemplation



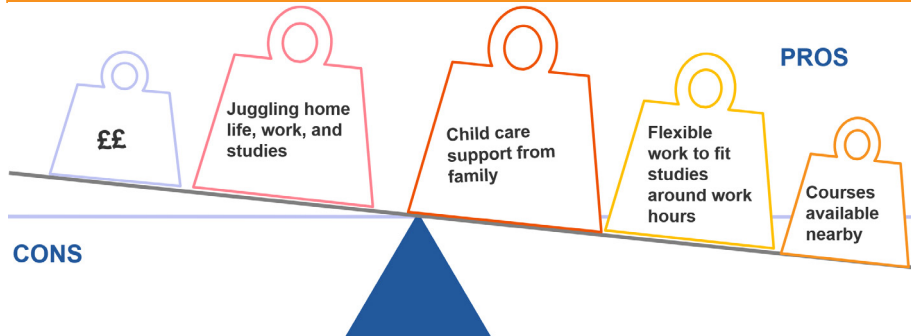
- = suggest resources for career transition advice
- = messages about alternative career options

### Contemplation



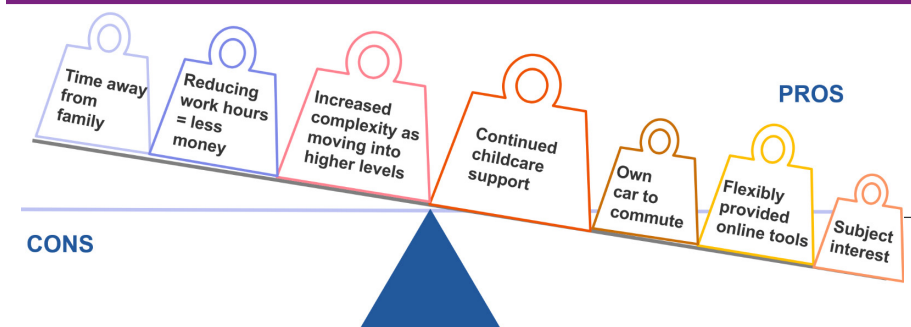
- = providers to continue with open days and open evenings
- = advertising targeted to older learners and those looking to change careers

### Determination & enrolment



- = advertising campaigns detailing local courses and registration dates
- = providers to offer specific details of courses regarding timings and time requirements

### Completion



- = providers to offer blended format, face to face and online
- = tutors to point students towards external online resources to support learning
- = childcare provision

## Summary

Life-long, defiant and outcome-focussed learners had a strong and clear purpose for learning and described being more able to overcome barriers to their learning. The most influential factors for them were positively reinforcing their engagement with learning. Learners in these groups seemed more likely to decide to learn and enrol more quickly and easily than learners in the other three groups. Life-long learners and defiant learners are already primed to learn and would require less convincing to engage with learning. Outcome-focussed learners would be more easily convinced to learn if the messaging was framed around what they will get out of the learning.

Tentative, exhausted and stuck in the status quo learners lacked a strong and clear purpose for learning and were less able to overcome their barriers. The most influential factors for them were undermining their engagement with learning. Learners in these groups seemed more challenging to engage with and convince to take up learning opportunities, especially the exhausted group. More targeted and intensive support would be required to help these types of learners to recognise their learning purpose and to overcome their barriers to learning.

## 10. Conclusion & Recommendations

To design and develop a successful retraining scheme, DfE need to understand how adults make decisions about learning. We spoke with 70 learners and 16 non-learners across three stages of qualitative research to understand what influences engagement in adult learning, and to identify opportunities for encouraging more adults into learning.

For every learner, there exists a complex and unique relationship between their own perceptions of the personal benefits and personal costs of learning. The trigger to participate in learning for each adult comes at a tipping point where personal benefits outweigh personal costs. The balance of cost and benefits exists throughout an adult's learning journey, from before they consider learning, right through to their completion, or non-completion, of their course, and back again to considering further learning. Adults go through four stages of decision-making (pre-contemplation, contemplation, determination and maintenance) and at each stage the nature and influence of the factors that inform an adult's decision on the balance between the personal costs and benefits of learning change.

A wide range of factors influence adults' desires, intentions, and abilities to engage in adult learning across the four stages of decision-making.

- Perceptions of psychological capability and control
- Social and cultural norms
- Previous experiences of education
- Physical capability and a diverse set of practical and circumstantial issues
- A desire for personal betterment
- Encouragement from influential people
- Financial position
- Flexibility of provision
- Quality of provision
- Having clear goals for learning

Our learners accessed a wide range of information and support throughout their learning journey. Trusted advisors, or individuals who personally know the learner or know the career/course the learner is interested in, were the most influential and commonly shared support type. These trusted advisors were typically facilitative, helping learners to navigate their learning journey. In a minority of cases, these individuals also acted as a barrier, setting a learner on the wrong learning path that led them to disengage from learning, or discouraging them from considering learning in the first place. Student

services, including admissions, financial aid, tutors, pastoral care and careers advice were also used, and the quality of availability and quality of these helped or hindered our learners' experiences. Tools such as online student finance calculators, online forums and videos of past students sharing experiences of courses were useful for those that found them. All effective support had one commonality: it was accessible, personalised, and encouraging.

Information and support most useful for Level 2 or 3 learners was on the availability and means of accessing financial aid, and on tailored, personalised, and encouraging support across the decision-making journey. Well run and inclusive open days or evenings were essential for these types of learners, especially when deciding to learn and enrol. Level 4 and 5 learners found advice from trusted sources of support and a range of tools, including online search engines, forums and foundational learning videos (or other resources) to refresh memory of skills from school as particularly helpful.

The factors of influence and support experiences of learners point towards opportunities to encourage adults into learning and to complete learning, summarised in Table 5.

**Table 5 Summary of influences and opportunities to engage adults in learning**

<b>Decision-making stage</b>	<b>Key factors of influence</b>	<b>Opportunities to encourage adults into learning</b>
<p><b>Pre-contemplation:</b></p> <p>Adults are not actively engaging with the possibilities of their learning. They may not be actively appraising aspects of their life that they do not find fulfilling and are therefore not considering learning as a pathway to personal or professional betterment.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceptions of psychological capability and control</li> <li>• Social and cultural norms</li> <li>• Previous experiences of education</li> <li>• Physical capability and a diverse set of practical and circumstantial issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interventions that raise the profile of learning in adults' consciousness and encourage them to consider it as a possibility</li> <li>• Communications that create a national culture in which adult learning is an ordinary part of life, where learning is something that adults cannot help but know about and come across e.g. priming through a TV character on a popular drama programme</li> <li>• Peripheral communications, positioned in spaces adults will encounter as they go about their everyday lives</li> </ul>

Decision-making stage	Key factors of influence	Opportunities to encourage adults into learning
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication sources that ask questions and gently encourage self-reflection, rather than actively marketing adult education</li> </ul>
<p><b>Contemplation:</b></p> <p>Adults have moved to the active consideration of the possibilities of learning and how learning might contribute to their personal betterment. They are exploring the practical and circumstantial aspects of learning and are engaged in a process of evaluating the potential value of learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A desire for personal betterment</li> <li>• Encouragement from influential people</li> <li>• Self-perception of capabilities for learning</li> <li>• Physical capability and a diverse set of practical and circumstantial issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The government, working with the National Careers Service, learning providers and other relevant organisations, should provide adults with clear and accessible information about the costs and benefits of undertaking learning. For example, the cost of the course; the type of financial support that is available; and the financial, personal and professional benefits of different courses</li> <li>• Provide information and support so potential learners understand how learning will alter their daily lives</li> <li>• Providers provide first-hand experiences of learning for adults exploring the possibility of learning</li> <li>• Employers and providers facilitate opportunities for adults to volunteer, or shadow work in occupations linked to learning</li> <li>• Design and deliver flexible courses , so adults see the variety of courses and formats of learning available</li> </ul>

Decision-making stage	Key factors of influence	Opportunities to encourage adults into learning
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deliver communications through channels people going through life disruptions are likely to encounter. For example, secondary school open days, GP practice, pension providers and job centres</li> <li>• Learning providers signpost their own local Information, Advice, Guidance (IAG) offers, where these exist.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Determination:</b></p> <p>At this stage adults decide to take-up learning and take action, such as enrolling onto a course. Adults act when their perception of the value of learning outweighs their perception of the challenges or costs to learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial and workplace support</li> <li>• Emotional and practical support</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Assure adults they can emotionally and practically cope with the demands of learning with IAG and support about the practicalities of enrolling and succeeding in learning. For example, expectations of the time commitment required; availability of financial support including access to loans, bursaries and grant; availability of wider emotional and practical support</li> <li>• Providers offer student support services tailored to meet the needs of, and be accessible to, adults, and to include support for adults with mental and physical health issues</li> <li>• Employers provide flexible workplace environment. and financial resources, to their staff</li> </ul>



Decision-making stage	Key factors of influence	Opportunities to encourage adults into learning
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Government develop a trustworthy and centrally-managed source of information for adults to use when selecting a course</li> </ul>
<p><b>Maintenance, completion, and early withdrawal:</b></p> <p>Adults are now learning, but to maintain and complete learning, a range of barriers may need to be navigated and a sense of the ultimate value of learning must be maintained, to ensure adults do not withdraw from learning prior to completion</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical capability</li> <li>• Flexibility of provision</li> <li>• Quality of provision</li> <li>• Psychological capability</li> <li>• Having clear goals for learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providers offer flexible provision, including the timing and location of learning, online and blended offers</li> <li>• Providers, employers and Government provide practical and financial support to adults to navigate difficulties with childcare, transport, course fees and equipment, and flexible working</li> <li>• Providers and employers provide and maintain supportive learning contexts</li> </ul>

To engage more adults into learning we recommend communications that create a national culture in which adult learning is an ordinary part of life. This needs to be approached through a combination of promotion, where adult learning is made more visible, and of provision, where a diverse offer of learning opportunities are available to all adults.

One way of achieving this priming is through a national advertising campaign, creating a national culture where adults cannot help but trip over examples of adult learning. This would communicate the benefits of lifelong learning and seek to normalise learning throughout life. This should make use of snappy strap lines or rhetorical questions, tested with a range of adults in advance to ensure language is inclusive and appealing. It would be used across advertising channels including national radio, television and social media.

Local providers and organisations with local and regional oversight of learning and training could adapt the advertisement, using locally tailored information and testimonials. These would still include the same central branding and strap line as the national campaign. Transport networks such as tubes and buses could provide key advertising

spaces for local communications. Local communications should signpost adults to where they could learn and to where they can get more information and advice.

Alongside this, fictional accounts of lifelong learning, for instance on popular television programmes, such as soaps, could be a useful way of normalising adult learning. These accounts would need to be authentic, therefore although the overall message about adults learning would be positive, narratives would need to include some of the barriers to learning that individuals had to overcome during a learning journey.

There also needs to be greater visibility of the role of learning across government policies and services. Each touch point that government has should be utilised, including HMRC interactions, council tax letters, Jobcentre Plus, NHS, libraries, schools, pensions to promote learning. There is an important leadership role for government here, as a cross departmental life-long learning strategy would be valuable. It could be a requirement that a department or policy has to articulate how it will contribute to this overarching strategy for lifelong learning.

Alongside the marketing of learning, the supply of a diversity of provision is key to creating a culture where learning throughout the life course is normalised and expected. There needs to be lots of different opportunities to learn in a range of different contexts, including formal education institutions, libraries, museums, workplaces, shopping and leisure centres, and via a range of platforms.

## Summary

This research has identified six types of learners, based on participants' attitudes towards learning: life-long learners; tentative learners; defiant learners; exhausted learners; outcome-focussed learners; and stuck in status quo learners. Just as individuals' perception of the personal benefits and costs of learning is specific to them, the interventions that they are likely to respond to will vary. In addition, an individual's attitude towards learning can change, meaning that they are likely to respond differently towards interventions over time and at different stages of the decision-making process. This research can help inform the design of these interventions.



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